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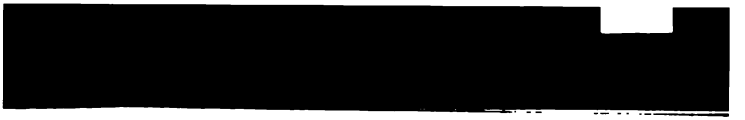

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BY

GEORGE BARTON

Author of

"The World's Greatest Military Spies and Secret Service Agents," etc.

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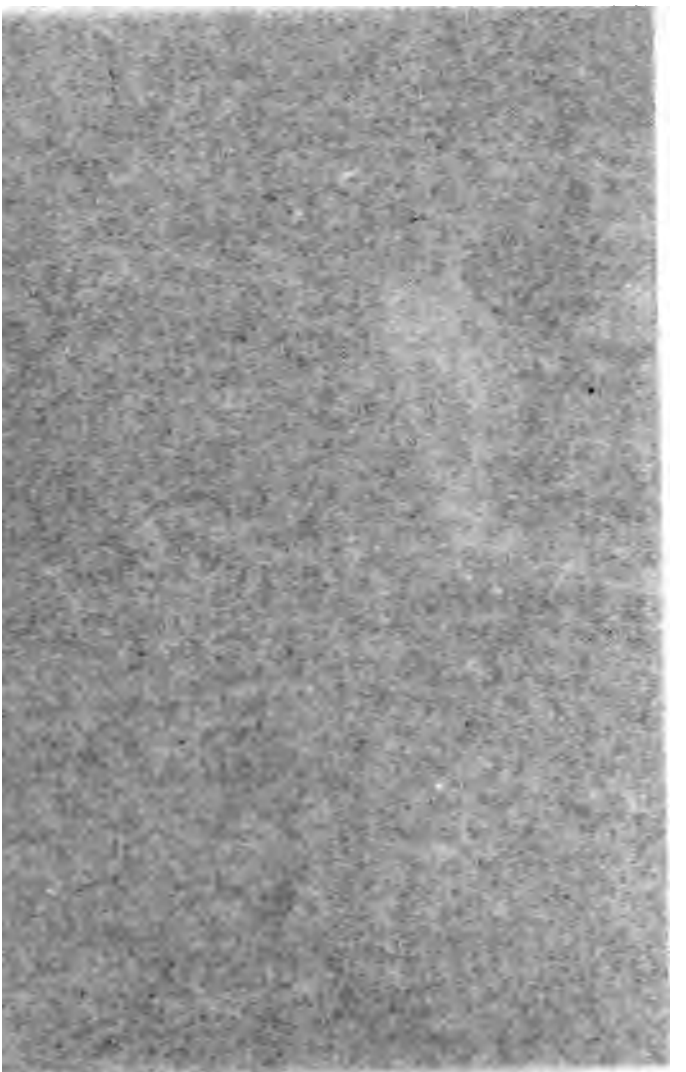

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TO

FRANCIS LYNDE

FRIEND AND CRITIC

[illegible]

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THE MYSTERY OF THE RED FLAME

CHAPTER I

THE STAR OF THE SOUTH

THIS is a plain, unvarnished tale of an exciting adventure which occurred to me while I was in the United States Customs Service. There were phases of it which were never known to the public at the time and there were reasons — diplomatic reasons — which made it necessary that we should work under cover. But these reasons no longer exist and I am betraying no official confidences and injuring no innocent persons when I now — as I propose to do — give the complete and authentic story to the world.

How much it meant to the Government I was serving and how much it meant to myself the reader must determine as we proceed. It may be said that I was at fault in some of the methods that were employed. Maybe I was. I can only

ask, What would you have done if you had been in my place? I can simply lay the facts before you, without the slightest reservation, and ask you how you would have acted under the same circumstances.

I had just taken the oath of office as a Special Agent of the United States Treasury Department when I received a hurry call from the Collector of Customs of the district. As the colored messenger ushered me into the somber-looking office I felt as if I had unexpectedly intruded upon a lodge of sorrow. Collector Fread sat at his desk, frowning and twirling his eyeglasses, with the air of a man who is at his wits' ends.

Bromley Barnes, the veteran investigator of the service, sat opposite the Collector, and it is significant when I say that it was the first time I had seen him without a smile on his amiable face. His thumbs were stuck in the armpits of his vest and his eyebrows were knitted as if he were trying to solve a difficult problem by mere force of will.

The Appraiser of Merchandise, the Chief Inspector, and the boarding officer of the port were ranged about the desk with looks of expectancy on their faces.

As I entered, the Collector rose from his chair and paced the room nervously. He was a medium-

sized man, wearing a black frock coat and carefully creased trousers. He stroked his luxuriant brown mustache as he moved up and down the room, and swung his tortoise-shell glasses from the end of a long black ribbon.

The Collector was a bit pompous in his manner and inclined to be oratorical in his speech. Yet he fitted into his surroundings as a picture fits into a frame that has been specially made to hold it. The walls were covered with portraits of former collectors of the port and in the corner was a large mahogany grandfather's clock, whose ticking was the only sound to break the silence that had fallen over the little group of men. The Collector paused presently, and carefully adjusting the tortoise-shell glasses on his nose peered at me aggressively. He pointed to a vacant chair.

"Sit down and listen."

I obeyed, wonderingly. He walked over to his own chair and pulling up his trousers so that the crease would not be disturbed began to talk to me in a voice and with the manner of a man who is making an address to a large and unsympathetic audience.

"One of the chief purposes of this office," he declared, "is to collect duty upon articles shipped from Europe into the United States. These arti-

cles include diamonds. Now I have reason to believe that diamonds are being systematically smuggled into this port. I have so informed my men, but in spite of their vigilance the smuggling continues. Barnes, here, who is reputed to be one of the shrewdest men in the service, has been on the job and still the smuggling goes on. Am I stating the case correctly, sir?"

Thus addressed, the veteran investigator broke into the oration with an evident sense of relief.

"The Collector," he said in his clear, crisp manner, "is especially provoked by a case that has occurred within the last twenty-four hours. A week ago we had a cablegram from the confidential agent of the Treasury Department located at Rio Janeiro, Brazil, stating that a passenger — whose name was not given — had sailed on the *Dom Pedro* with a large quantity of precious stones. That in itself was not unusual, but it was also stated that this collection included the famous Red Diamond known as The Star of the South."

"The Star of the South," I repeated mechanically.

"Yes," continued Barnes, with a trace of impatience. "You have made a study of diamonds and precious stones and you must have heard of this famous stone."

"I have," I replied, hesitatingly, "in a general sort of way."

"Well," continued the old man with a sigh of resignation, "you are probably aware that aside from South Africa, Brazil has the most wonderful diamond mines in the world. Away back in 1853 some prospectors were working in the mines of Bogan when they found this marvelous diamond. The rough stone weighed something like eighty carats. It was cut into two diamonds by the fortunate owner and when finished they proved to be of an irreproachable purity, transparent and as dazzling as the noonday sun."

"I take it," I remarked, "that they were a delicate rose tint."

"Nothing of the kind," interrupted Barnes. "They were a red-blooded red. That is what makes them the rarest diamonds in the world. There are many diamonds which get the rose tint by refraction. There are several red stones that come near being the real thing, but so far as I know, these twin stones known originally as The Star of the South are the only perfect red diamonds on earth."

"And they came over on the *Dom Pedro?*" I asked, becoming interested.

"Please don't interrupt," exclaimed the old man

testily. "As I was saying, they made two diamonds out of this precious stone. One was placed in the National Museum in Rio Janeiro, where it has excited the wonder of visitors for more than half a century. The other passed from hand to hand until it was finally sold to some wealthy collector about three months ago. Now, according to our confidential agent in Brazil, it has come over on the *Dom Pedro.*"

"The *Dom Pedro* docked yesterday," I said eagerly.

"It did — there's no doubt about that," replied the old man drily.

"And the diamond — did you find the diamond?"

"We did not," replied Barnes and the Collector in chorus.

In spite of my anxiety and the importance of the business I could scarcely keep from laughing aloud, the two veterans of the service presented such a lugubrious appearance.

"Might — might I inquire if particular precautions were taken to locate this valuable stone?"

"Particular precautions were taken," said the Collector, "and without result. For details I refer you to Hartley here."

Hartley, the Chief Inspector, a fine upstanding

fellow, with clear, penetrating eyes, joined in the conversation at this point.

"Never since I entered the service," he began, "have we given the passengers of any ship such a thorough search as we did those of the *Dom Pedro*. It was a busy day but in spite of that I put half of my force on this one boat. The passenger list was heavy, and to add to my perplexities the Spanish Ambassador and the members of his staff were on the *Dom Pedro*. We had special instructions from Washington to show him every possible attention and courtesy, and in order that nothing should go wrong I gave His Excellency my personal attention. His trunks were separated from the general cargo, and as soon as I had disposed of them I turned my attention to the business of looking after the Red Diamond."

"And with no success," chimed in the Collector.

"With no success," admitted the Chief Inspector. "But I want to assure you that it was not the fault of my men. We never went into such minute details before. Every trunk and every bit of baggage was examined in every possible manner. We paid special attention to the usual tricks of smugglers. We looked for false bottoms and we turned the contents of trunks inside out. If you had heard the protests and the profanity of the

passengers you would not have considered it a perfunctory examination."

"Did you personally search any of the passengers?" asked Barnes.

"Yes, but in a diplomatic and tactful manner. We had a number of the men bumping carelessly into the passengers in the expectation of feeling anything that might seem bulky."

"But would the Red Diamond be bulky?" I ventured to inquire.

"Yes, comparatively so," answered Barnes. "You know it was in a handsome gold setting, and when you consider the unusual size of the stone you will realize that it required something out of the ordinary as a frame."

"Did you look into handbags and things of that kind?" I asked.

"In every case. And after that we made a minute search of all the cabins. We looked under the cushions and we examined the bed clothing."

"How about the crew?"

"They were compelled to undergo a most rigid scrutiny. We ordered the steward to open his store rooms and we inspected every bit of linen. Finally we put the steerage passengers through the third degree. I tell you, gentlemen," he exclaimed, raising his voice, "there never has been such a

thorough search of a ship and its passengers since this place was made a port."

In the midst of the laugh that followed this declaration the Collector said:

"I can testify to the truth of that statement for ever since the arrival of the *Dom Pedro* I have been receiving letters complaining of the harsh and illegal methods that were used toward the passengers. Most of the writers complain that it was un-American and some of them have written to the Secretary of the Treasury demanding my head on the ground that I am unfit to administer the customs business."

"I notice," commented Barnes drily, "that your head is still safely fastened on your manly shoulders."

"Yes," admitted Fread bitterly, "but I'd be willing to part with it, officially, if in return I could put my hands on that devilish diamond. I hate to be beaten, and I must confess that the fellow who is running this smuggling syndicate is making a laughing stock of the customs officials."

Bromley Barnes moved about impatiently while the Collector was thus freeing his mind.

"See here, Fread," he said, "we've been all over that ground. We're here for a definite purpose and the sooner we get down to business the better it will be for all concerned."

"You can't get down to it any too soon for me," grumbled the Collector, and moving into a favorable light before the mirror he re-adjusted his cravat to suit his fancy, all the while grumbling over the unkind fate that had thrown so many undetected smugglers into his district.

"Hugh," said Barnes, turning to me, "I understand that you have some knowledge of diamonds and gems."

"Well," I replied, "I don't pretend to be an expert, but I've been making a study of the subject for the last two years and I think I know something about it."

"Good!" he exclaimed, rubbing his hands together with a sort of joyous satisfaction. "I thought you were up on the business and I only wanted to make sure of it."

"Yes?" I echoed wonderingly.

"It was the most important part of the plan," he continued, half to himself, "because if you didn't really have this knowledge it might upset everything."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"There isn't much to understand," said Barnes, "except that I've discovered the man who is going to recover the Red Diamond."

My eyes opened with wonder. Even yet I did

not realize what the veteran investigator was driving at. I spoke, innocently enough:

"Who is the man?"

He pointed a long, bony finger at me.

"You," he said, with his winsome smile. "You are the man."

CHAPTER II

HEDGEWATER HOUSE

FOR some moments I sat there staring at Bromley Barnes. His announcement had, in a way, made me gasp for breath. I do not claim to be a modest man. I think I appreciate myself at my true value, but I had sense enough to realize that I lacked experience. To be sworn in as a Special Agent of the Treasury at ten o'clock in the morning and to be assigned to the most perplexing problem that has vexed the Department in years, at noon, was going it pretty strong. I ventured to express myself to that effect and then I remarked that even if I were willing to undertake the case of the Red Diamond I really would not know where to commence. Barnes laughed:

"You needn't trouble yourself about that part of the business. I'll start you off right and I promise to be your guide, counselor, and friend at every stage of the proceedings."

That altered the situation to my mind and made me do some quick thinking. Here was a chance

to win reputation and probably promotion. Such an opportunity might not come again in years.

"I'm disposed to accept the assignment," I said finally, in a condescending tone, "if —"

"Disposed?" grinned Barnes. "Why, man, alive, you've already accepted it. I've accepted it for you. You know in this branch of the service we don't ask a man whether he'd like to do his work or not. We tell him to go and do it. It's like the Army and Navy in that regard. And the man that stops a counterfeiting scheme or runs down a band of smugglers is doing the work of a patriot just as much as if he shouldered a musket or worked behind the guns of a battleship."

I do not know whether I blushed at this implied rebuke or not. I know that I felt my cheeks getting very warm.

"I hope," I began in a stammering way, "that — that you don't for a moment —"

Bromley Barnes was on his feet in an instant and was laying an affectionate hand on my shoulder.

"It's all right, Hugh," he declared heartily. "I've vouched for you and I know you'll do me credit. I'm getting old and rusty and I expect my mantle will fall on your broad shoulders one of these days. In the meantime read that advertisement."

As he spoke, he thrust a copy of the *Chronicle* in my hand. It had been folded so that the want advertisement section appeared before my gaze. Heavy pencil lines had been drawn about one part which read:

> WANTED — A young man of education with a knowledge of gems and precious stones to assist the writer in preparing a catalogue and description of his collection. Apply at once. Basil Wharton, Hedgewater Park.

"That's very interesting," I remarked, handing the newspaper back to Barnes. "Now what about it?"

"Nothing much," he smiled, "except that it is just the sort of a job that would suit you."

"You don't say," I retorted, the desire to be ironical getting the better of me.

"I do say — in fact you have already accepted it."

"Indeed," I managed to gasp, "and when am I to report for duty?"

"To-night!"

This time I was completely floored — metaphorically speaking. While I was struggling to find words to express my astonishment Collector Fread mercifully came to my rescue.

"Barnes is rather abrupt, Garland," he said to

me, " and I think you are entitled to an explanation. In the first place, he needs you on this case because you are new and unknown. All of his other men have been spotted and the moment they appear the rascals disappear. When we saw this advertisement it made us almost shout with joy. It meant an opportunity of placing you in a house where the whereabouts of the Red Diamond were bound to become known sooner or later. Colonel Wharton is one of the greatest amateur collectors of gems in this country and we have a notion that he will be one of the first persons to whom the smugglers will try to sell the stone —"

" And so," interrupted Barnes, taking up the thread of the narrative, " we decided that you must get this position at all hazards. Time was short so we applied for it by telegraph — in your name. The references we gave were formidable enough to get you a seat on the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States. They did better — to my way of thinking — they got you the place with Colonel Wharton. The appointment came by telegraph and has just been sent here from your lodgings. You are instructed to report for duty at the earliest possible moment."

" I — I must say that you gentlemen have been very enterprising in my behalf."

The Collector looked at me sharply and giving his glasses an extra twirl remarked:

"Don't flatter yourself, young man. Any enterprise we may have shown has been in the interest of the benevolent old gentleman who is popularly known as your Uncle Samuel."

Having delivered himself of this shot the Collector rose from his chair, smoothed out the lines in his frock coat and going over to the great mirror on the side of the room looked at himself admiringly.

"Now, Hugh," said Barnes with the manner of a judge on the bench, "if you have anything to say as to why sentence should not be pronounced this is the time to speak or forever hold your peace."

"I accept, of course," I hastened to say, "but the thing is so cut and dried that there really does not seem to be anything for me to do."

"On the contrary," corrected the veteran, "there is everything for you to do. We have simply arranged the preliminaries. We get you in the house — you do the rest. If you are to succeed it means courage, tact, and the highest order of intelligence."

"Am I to understand that you suspect Colonel Wharton?"

"On the contrary, we regard him as above sus-

picion. His standing in the community is so high that it may be said to place him above reproach. But he is human — and he is a collector."

"You mean by that," I began, "that —"

"I mean by that," interrupted Barnes, "that your real collector is not morally responsible for the things he may do in acquiring his collection. Did you ever see a miser gloating over his gold? ever notice how lovingly he handles each separate bit of coin?"

"Never," I confessed, "except by hearsay. I've read of such things in novels and seen them in plays, but for all I know a real living miser does not exist."

"Well, you know what I mean," said Barnes sharply, "and it will give you an idea of the things that might be done by an enthusiastic collector. Now, I don't for a moment intend to reflect upon the integrity of Colonel Wharton, who is one of our most distinguished citizens and a descendant of a Colonial family, but if it was necessary for him to shut his eyes in order to add to his collection, why, I'm afraid he'd shut his eyes."

"But the idea of going there disguised. I —"

"You won't be disguised," grinned Barnes; "we don't wear false whiskers in this branch of the Government service. You'll go there in your own

name. In fact, you've been engaged in that name."

"Won't that be a little risky?" I asked.

"Not in the least," was the uncomplimentary reply. "You're not well known, and in any event you'll not be suspected of being connected with the Government service. Your year in the Appraiser's Department has all been on the inside and while you have become fairly familiar with gems and their history the public has not become familiar with you."

"That's true," I admitted, "and I guess I can shake off the feeling that I'm creeping into the man's house under cover."

Collector Fread, who was standing in front of his desk at this moment, brought his fist down with a bang that shook the ink bottles.

"That's sentimental nonsense," he thundered. "If Colonel Wharton is an honest man — and I believe he is — you can't possibly do him any harm. If he isn't, then he deserves all he gets. That's as plain as the nose on your face, young man, and nobody could mistake that."

This reference to my Napoleonic nostrils evoked a general laugh and ended the conference. The little group separated and Barnes left with me to give me my final instructions. I had some work

that had to be finished that afternoon and what with packing and settling my affairs in anticipation of a prolonged absence, it was late in the evening when I was ready to start. I would have postponed the going until the following morning but Barnes would not hear of it.

"Delays are dangerous, young man, and the sooner you get down to business the better it will be for the Government. Besides," he added, "I expect to have your first report within the next forty-eight hours."

So I sent a telegram that I was on my way and boarded the ten o'clock accommodation for Hedgewater. The station was deserted when I reached there and I was the only one that alighted from the train. Hedgewater House was about a mile away in the direction of the river, and as there was no conveyance in sight I took a firm grip on my suitcase and started down the road. The station agent told me that if I went straight ahead it would bring me to the main entrance of the estate. It was a long walk and a dreary one and the disposition of the moon to retire behind a bank of dark clouds at frequent intervals made the journey a dangerous one as well.

I felt momentarily as if I might step into some bottomless pit, and when that feeling was not giv-

ing me a creepy sensation in the spine I was wondering if the shadows behind the trees along the roadside were really trees or highwaymen laying in wait to assault me. However, the longest as well as the saddest journeys have their end and presently I came in sight of the house that was to be my home for some days.

The gates were open and at the end of a long vista I could see a lamp in front of the doorway. The house itself loomed up gray and menacing in the gloom. The slanting roof and the bay windows on the side gave one the impression of specters in the night. All around the estate was a great hedge, higher than a man's head, and concealing the dwelling from the roadside and the view of too inquisitive neighbors.

I do not know what came over me as I made my way up the path leading to the front door. I am no coward, but the feeling that I experienced was a feeling akin to fear. It was a sense of some impending misfortune. The dim light was in front of me by this time, but even that failed to relieve the heaviness of heart that had gripped me so unexpectedly and so unreasonably. Possibly the strain and excitement of the day had unnerved me. I resolutely shook off the feeling and seizing the old-fashioned brass knocker on the big white door

tapped it smartly two or three times. The noise, curiously enough, startled me. Why, I cannot say. But the echoes of the sounds came back with amazing accuracy. I heard the shuffling of footsteps in the interior of the house and these footfalls on the bare floors of the stairways did not help to restore my tranquillity or peace of mind.

Just as the door was about to open I happened to glance down the path whence I had just walked and something that flashed past the range of my vision caused me to start as if I had been struck in the face. It was a man, and from the light of the moon, which had just emerged from behind one of the everlasting clouds, I could see that he was dressed in a gray suit. His movements were not reassuring. He acted like a man whose motives are, at least, dubious. My impulse was to run down the path after him, but at that instant the door was thrown open and a flood of light illuminated the old-fashioned porch. A colored servant stood before me.

"My name is Garland," I began, "and—"

He bowed low, like a genuine Southern darky.

"Yessir," he murmured, "I'll look after the gemman. Colonel Wharton am slightly indisposed, sir, and will see you in the morning, sir."

I smiled.

"What am I to do?"

By way of answer he took my suitcase and marching ahead entered.

"Follow me, sir."

I followed him up a broad stairway and we reached an equally broad hallway on the second landing. At the rear end of this was a large room into which I was ceremoniously ushered. It was all that could be desired and evidently great pains had been taken to provide for my comfort. After the colored servitor left me I lost no time in preparing for bed. When the light was turned off I walked aimlessly toward the window. It appeared to be on the side of the house and it gave me a view equally of the river in the rear and the roadway in the front.

Just at that moment the figure of the man in the gray suit flashed past the entrance to Hedgewater House.

What did I do about it?

Not a thing. I slipped under the covers and went sound asleep.

CHAPTER III

DORA WHARTON

I WAS awakened by the sun streaming into the windows of my room at Hedgewater House, and, without waiting for the extra twenty winks to which we are all entitled, I jumped out of bed and dressed.

The outlook from my window commanded a splendid view of the Harmony River. The day was clear, cool and crisp and the sun shining upon the smooth waters of the noble stream caused it to sparkle with a diamond-like effect. There was a bend in the river at this point and the suggestion of a cove just above Hedgewater reminded me of what I had read of the glories of the Bay of Naples.

The view about the house was equally grateful to the eye. Seen from this height, and bathed in the light of the morning sun, Hedgewater House seemed to lose much of the somberness that had oppressed me on my arrival the night before. The high hedge about the estate formed a natural green wall that gave it a privacy without the coldness that

goes with a stone wall. The grounds were attractively laid out in walks and drives, with here and there a picturesque flower garden and everywhere green, velvety lawns. Near the water's edge was a little summer house, with latticed sides and a red roof that contrasted pleasantly with the green grass and the blue water.

I felt satisfied that, externally, at least, I was going to enjoy my stay at Hedgewater House.

But with this feeling there came the consciousness of my purpose in this house. I was coming there under false pretenses with the intention of spying upon its occupants. That thought gave me an uneasy feeling. Almost in the same instant I excused myself with the remembrance that I was there in the line of duty. And I recalled the words of Bromley Barnes when he said that the man who served his country in its secret service was just as much of a patriot as if he were a soldier or a sailor defending its flag and its honor.

After dressing I went down the broad hallways and out into the garden. I had been told to make myself at home and I proceeded to do so. It was a perfect day and the promise given of the estate from my window was more than fulfilled in my walk about the grounds. Presently I caught a glimpse of a white skirt in the distance. Evi-

dently I was not the only one who had risen early to get the benefit of the morning air. Although a stranger I was obeying the injunction to make myself "at home." It seemed rather informal and unusual, but I continued to stroll about in the expectation of meeting some one to whom I could make my identity known. At that moment I caught another glimpse of the white skirt and the next instant I beheld a girl cutting flowers from a bush and arranging them in a bouquet. She was young and attractive. That much was evident, even from a distance.

Presently, at a sharp turn in the path, I came face to face with the girl. She was evidently about twenty-two or three and full of life and vivacity. She was slender and there was a natural grace and quickness in her movements. But it was her face that attracted my attention, a face framed in a profusion of glossy black hair. Her forehead was broad and white and smooth and heightened the intellectual look which won the instant respect of the observer. But any possible fear that she might be a blue stocking was dispelled by the quizzical good-natured, inquiring black eyes and the smiling lips.

Such was Dora Wharton as she appeared to me before I knew her name and before I became acquainted with the qualities of her heart and mind

which — for me — set her apart from the members of her sex.

The moment she saw me her face brightened and she came forward with outstretched hand. There was a child-like frankness and eagerness about her that irresistibly attracted me at the start and I felt a sense of pleasure at her approach.

"If I am not mistaken," she said smilingly, "this is Mr. Hugh Garland."

"You are not mistaken," I replied quietly, matching her smile.

"I see that I must present myself," she continued, with that engaging frankness. "I am Miss Dora Wharton."

"It is a pleasure to meet you," I responded, inwardly berating myself at my inability to think of any more appropriate response.

During this interchange of civilities she had busied herself in arranging the flowers she held in her hand. Some of the stems showed a propensity to waywardness and she knitted her brows as she forced them into place.

"I don't know what you must think of us, Mr. Garland," she said presently, "but by a chain of circumstances over which we had no control there was no one to meet you on your arrival at Hedgewater House last night."

"The lateness of the hour," I murmured. "The fault was all my own."

"You are kind to look at it in that way," she smiled. "My uncle expected you, but he was indisposed last night and was forced to retire early."

"You know of my arrangement with him?" I ventured.

"Oh, yes, and I'm sure it is going to be a great comfort to him. You know Uncle is getting along in years now and his health has not been robust. His heart is wrapped in his collection and it will set him at ease to know that he has an efficient assistant who will undertake the task of getting it in shape."

We had been walking along a flower-bordered path as she talked and she paused for a moment to glance at an exquisite wrist watch.

"We do not breakfast for half an hour yet," she remarked. "Perhaps you would like to view the grounds in the meantime? That is, if you are willing to accept me as a guide."

There was no coquetry in her voice or manner, and there was a natural dignity about her that precluded the notion of answering her with any banal flattery. So I simply replied, honestly enough, that it would please me immensely to do as she suggested.

Many years have passed since that first wa through the grounds of Hedgewater House, and have had as full a life as the average young Amer can, but the memory of the incident remains clear in my mind as though it had occurred b yesterday.

That half hour passed with amazing swiftnes and just before it came to an end we sat in t summer-house overlooking the river whose ripplir waters sparkled in a way that inadequately reflecte the cheerfulness of my heart. As she sat the with the morning sunshine on her face I had a opportunity of studying the girl to more adva tage. She was not beautiful, in the ordinary sen of that word. Indeed, her features were irregul and her nose was not large enough to suit the e actions of an artist. But her bright eyes, with the quizzical, questioning expression, and her smilir lips, brightened her face amazingly and made h the most attractive girl I had ever met. It w with genuine regret that I heard her say:

"It's time we were in the breakfast-room. Au Sarah must be there by now and she can't bear t thought of having to wait for her morning meal

We had risen and started in the direction of t house. She noted the look of inquiry in my eye

"Aunt Sarah — Mrs. Crilly — is mother an

everything else in the world to me. I'm sure you will like her."

"Your recommendation is sufficient," I said with my first attempt at gallantry.

"I'm afraid you shall have to take your first meal in Hedgewater House with only two uninteresting women for company. Uncle will not be down until later. We have two house guests at present, Monsieur Jules Jacquette, who, like Uncle, is an enthusiast upon gems, and Mr. Victor Jayne, a steamship acquaintance, who came over with us on our return from our last trip abroad. Both have arranged to breakfast with Uncle in order to discuss some prosy business matter. But I am anxious to have you meet both of them later. Monsieur Jacquette is especially interesting. He has traveled everywhere, met everybody, and has a wonderful fund of knowledge."

"That sounds formidable — you almost frighten me, Miss Wharton."

"There is no occasion for fear," she laughed. "Monsieur Jacquette is really a very amiable person."

We had reached the breakfast-room — a bright attractive room, overlooking the most inviting portion of the garden. At the same moment a little old lady entered from another doorway. Under

any circumstances she would have elicited a second look from me, but in that Colonial framework she was positively picturesque. She must have been quite old, but there was a freshness about her face and a light in her shrewd, kindly eyes that suggested the fountain of eternal youth. She wore a steel-colored dress, with rare lace collar which was kept in place by a large, old-fashioned brooch. Her snow-white hair was parted in the middle, and, altogether, her appearance was one of effective simplicity. She came directly to the young girl and kissed her affectionately.

"Good morning, my dear," she said in a low, sweet voice.

"Auntie," announced the girl, glancing in my direction, "this is Mr. Hugh Garland, who has come to help Uncle with his dreadful antiques."

She looked me straight in the eye and putting out her hand gripped mine with a vigor and certainty which betokened vitality and sincerity.

"I'm glad to meet you, young man," was her greeting, "and if you succeed in relieving Colonel Wharton of his anxiety over his treasures you will place us all under a great obligation."

In spite of the strangeness of the situation my appetite was unimpaired and I did full justice to a breakfast that was appetizing in the fullest sense

of that much abused word. A neatly-dressed maid served the meal. Mrs. Crilly took a motherly interest in this girl, named Amy Smith, and in a moment of confidence informed me that Amy was saving her money in the expectation of being married in a short time.

The conversation at table was of a general character. But, assuredly, I had no cause to complain. The white-haired old lady and the black-haired young woman made the time pass very agreeably for me and that, too, without any evidence of effort upon their part. As I glanced from one to the other I could not escape the feeling that they were mutually indispensable. I felt sure that Dora Wharton would be just such a person as Aunt Sarah when she became old and I was equally confident that Aunt Sarah must have been like Dora when she was a young girl.

After breakfast we stepped out on the broad porch that surrounded the house and as we did so I saw a tall, elderly man approaching. I guessed rightly that it was Colonel Wharton. He was thin and slightly stoop-shouldered and had the abstracted air of a man who does much thinking. He greeted me quietly and kindly, and after apologizing for his non-appearance the night before suggested that we go over to his "museum," as he

called it, where he would explain the nature of the work that was expected of me.

We started off together, after an adieu to the ladies. Dora and her aunt walked down the pathway in the direction of the summer-house. The Colonel talked to me as we walked but I must confess that my thoughts were on his niece rather than upon his curiosities, of which he talked enthusiastically.

Instinctively I paused and glanced at the retreating figure of Dora Wharton. The gracefulness of her figure, in the distance, reminded me of the charm of her face and manner. The mere fact of leaving her presence left me with a sense of loss.

I tried to think of other things, of my prospective employment, of my reason for being in this house. It all came back to the one thing.

Try to disguise it as I would, I could not shut my mind to the truth — I was already in love with Dora Wharton.

CHAPTER IV

I MEET JULES JACQUETTE

THE building into which I was led by Colonel Wharton was in reality a small addition to Hedgewater House. It was reached by a covered pathway from the main dwelling and I noticed that the Colonel unlocked it before entering and that he turned the key on it after we left the place.

"This is not open to the public," he said, with an explanatory smile, "and I don't relish the idea of visitors wandering about at will — not even the members of my own household."

It was understood, of course, that I should do most of my work in the private museum, but aside from myself I soon discovered that no one was permitted to visit the place without the consent of Colonel Wharton, and then in his company. It may be wondered how it was that I, a comparative stranger, should be admitted into the holy of holies from which even relatives of the owner were so scrupulously excluded. But that is explained by the mention of Bromley Barnes. The veteran in-

vestigator was the most thorough person I ever met in my life. There was not a detail of my business at Hedgewater House that he had not foreseen and provided for. Among other things I discovered that I had been "bonded" with a well-known corporation, by the terms of which Colonel Wharton was fully protected in his property and possessions so far as I was concerned.

The museum was a one-story building with a dome so arranged that there was an abundance of light and ventilation. It had been built for the purpose for which it was used, and the arrangements, so far as I could see, were admirable. It did not take me long to discover that Colonel Wharton's collection was neither so large nor so varied as I had expected. In fact it consisted of three small collections. The first was of coins, the second books and the third gems. But what these collections lacked in quantity they more than made up in quality. All of the articles were actual rarities. Most of the coins, books and gems were so rare that it would have been very difficult to duplicate them.

Colonel Wharton was an intelligent enthusiast and he discoursed interestingly upon his hobby. He saw that he had gained my attention and that fact brought the light to his eyes and the flush of

eagerness to his cheeks. The antiques were in fairly good condition but I could see that it would mean weeks of unremitting labor to properly arrange and classify them. It was understood that I was to begin my work on the following day. It would take me twenty-four hours, the Colonel said, to "get my bearings."

I had always taken an enthusiastic interest in the science of numismatics, and Colonel Wharton's collection of coins claimed my instant attention. It did not take me long to recognize the value of these coins. He had among other things the earliest known coins which were issued by the Greeks in the seventh century before the Christian era. After that came fine specimens of Roman money and so on down through ancient, mediæval and modern times. There was one section consisting entirely of Oriental coins and this contained bits of silver and gold from ancient Persia, Arabia, modern Persia, India, China and coins of the Far East.

Colonel Wharton talked of these in a vein of fascinating interest. He explained to me, what I already knew, that a study of these coins would give a history of the world, at least for the periods for which they stood. The inscriptions on the coins were studies in geography, politics and religion. In most cases these bits of metal bore the

busts or effigies of the reigning sovereigns and they indicated whether it was a republic or a monarchy and the method of worship. In some cases they even went further because there were special issues of medals to commemorate the defeat or the success of the armies of the country for which they stood.

I was able to give only a cursory examination of this wonderful collection, and then I glanced over the rare books, which consisted mainly of first editions in various countries and at different periods. That I would get much joy out of these books went without saying. Finally, I made a hasty survey of the section devoted to precious gems. This was the smallest of all, although it is quite safe to say that it was the most valuable. Nearly all of the stones were antiques — which is to say that they were set in frames of very ancient manufacture. It was quite evident that in this collection the Colonel had not gone after gems for their value in money. He wanted them for their rarity alone. He had pearls, sapphires, rubies and a brilliant topaz.

It was while we were going through this collection that there came a sharp rapping at the door of the museum. Colonel Wharton frowned impatiently. He disliked to be interrupted — especially

when he was among his beloved curiosities. Nevertheless he went to the door and opened it. Incidentally I heard a voice, positive, insistent and all-pervading, making voluminous and abject apologies for having disturbed the good Colonel while he was amusing himself with his precious possessions. The Colonel seemed to recover his good temper quickly, for he ushered the caller into the room, and the next moment I heard him saying:

"Mr. Garland, I want you to meet Monsieur Jacquette. He has much in common with us in our love of the rare and the beautiful."

I glanced at the man who stood bowing before me with the ceremonious mien of a Field Marshal and the agility of a dancing master. His presence seemed to fill the room. That is the only way in which I can express my sense of the magnetism of the man. He had taken my hand and, I feared, was going to kiss it. But he paused before reaching that point and said:

"It is indeed a high honor to become acquainted with Monsieur Garland."

Why it should have been such a distinction was more than I could understand, and I ascribed this extravagance of language to the Southern origin of M. Jacquette. Evidently, to him, it was nothing more than a polite form of address. He turned

to speak to Colonel Wharton and that gave me an opportunity of studying the man.

He was of medium size and stockily built. A big head rested on a thick neck. His legs were short and this gave his body the impression of being out of proportion to the size of the man. His partly silvered hair was closely cropped, giving him a pugnacious appearance. He wore a mustache and an imperial and he looked at you out of a pair of compelling gray eyes. He talked English perfectly. Indeed, his conversation was easy and fluent and he accompanied it with nervous gesticulations. There was something characteristic of the man in his hands. They were large hands, they were eager hands, they were greedy hands. As I watched the pantomime, as he moved over to the far corner of the room and talked to Colonel Wharton in a subdued voice, I felt just the slightest bit of distrust for Monsieur Jules Jacquette. It was a perfectly unreasonable feeling; I had no basis on which to found it except the sudden dislike I had taken to his hands. I felt that they were the sort of hands that would not stop at anything to accomplish the purposes of their owner.

I was aroused from my meditations by the two men coming in my direction. Colonel Wharton

looked perplexed and worried, but M. Jacquette was smiling like a basket of chips, as the saying goes, although in my long and varied experience I have never known a basket of chips to indulge in a smile. As he approached I caught the heavy odor of musk. I learned later that this came from his favorite perfume. Maybe I was whimsical. Maybe I was prejudiced. I don't know, but at all events M. Jacquette, after that first meeting, was always associated in my mind with greedy hands and the odor of musk. He gave me a playful tap on the shoulder with one of his heavy hands and, singularly enough, it was a touch as light and as graceful as the tap of a woman's fan.

"So my young friend has come to relieve the Colonel of the task of classifying his wonderful collection?"

"I'm going to help as much as I can."

"Ah," he cried, with a penetrating look from those steely-blue eyes, "Monsieur Garland is too modest. He underrates himself."

I laughed.

"Why the mirth?" he asked in good-natured query.

"Pardon me, but the word monsieur struck my funny bone. But it is perfectly natural in your mouth — as a son of La Belle France."

He shrugged his broad shoulders and lifted his bushy eyebrows at the same time.

"My friend does me too much honor. It would be one great joy to say that I was a Frenchman — a born Frenchman. But the best I can claim is that my father was a Canadian — a French Canadian, if you will — and my mother a native of Peru. Rio Janeiro was my birthplace. So, there you have my history in a nutshell, as you Americans say. I am half French-Canadian and Peruvian by descent, Brazilian by birth and — temporarily at least — North American by choice and adoption. Can you — as you Americans so quaintly say — beat it? I should say that you cannot beat it. Might I not say — with all due modesty — that I am a citizen of the world?"

He prattled ahead with the artlessness of a child and yet there was something in the depths of those gray eyes that was distinctly not child-like. We were walking toward the door of the museum. The Colonel was the personification of politeness to his guest and yet he could not altogether conceal a desire to be rid of him — for the present, at least. He smiled at the volubility of M. Jacquette, but beneath the smile there lurked a look of anxiety.

Colonel Wharton gave all the signs of a man in distress.

If M. Jacquette noticed this he gave no sign of it in his talk or manner. He kept talking constantly, not giving either of us a chance to get in a word edgewise. At one break in his flow of good English the Colonel happened to address him as Monsieur. He took it up at once.

"Ah! Colonel Wharton, is it any wonder that our estimable young friend here asks me if I come from La Belle France. You call me Monsieur and at once he conjures up visions of the most beautiful city in the world. That one word transports him on the wings of fancy to Paris. He sees the Champs Elysées and gazing down its broad expanse beholds the Arch de Triomph. He sees the Madeleine, the Place Vendôme, the Porte Saint-Denis, Notre Dame, the Panthéon, the tomb of Napoleon and the Eiffel Tower. Is it not so, my young friend?"

"It is so," I confessed, "and all of these things are the more vivid to me because I have never seen them."

"Ah, that is of no consequence," he said with his magnificent manner. "You have the imagination, and the young man who has the imagination possesses the world."

"Thank you, Monsieur," I said, smiling and bowing, and laying stress on the last word.

"I thank you, sir," he retorted, bowing until his sweeping hands almost touched the floor. "I thank you, and I place my hand on my heart as I do so. It is but your natural courtesy that makes you and Colonel Wharton speak thus. Both of you are overkind in calling me Monsieur when I am but entitled to the appellation of Senor. Am I right, sir, when I use the word appellation? You know that I am not yet familiar with all the uses of your noble language."

I laughed in spite of my desire not to like M. Jacquette.

"You are right as right can be, Monsieur. And let me make a confession to you. It is that I would be a proud and happy man if I could speak the English language as correctly and as fluently as you speak it."

I was totally unprepared for the violent demonstration which followed this little speech. Jules Jacquette embraced me with his two masterful arms. After that he persisted in taking both of my hands in his and wringing them with an ardor that made me wince.

"Ah, you young American," he cried, "you put me at such a terrible disadvantage. I cannot express the gratitude of my heart for the most magnificent compliment you have paid me. You see I

am helpless; I am dumb in the presence of your kind words."

A smile played about the mournful countenance of Colonel Wharton.

"It seems to me, M. Jacquette, that you have been entirely equal to the occasion."

The stocky one shrugged his shoulders and threw out his hands, palms upward, with a gesture which said that Colonel Wharton having spoken, there was no more for Jules Jacquette to say.

In spite of these little by-plays it was still evident that the Colonel was anxious to have the Brazilian leave the building. More than that, he seemed fearful that the man might say too much in my presence.

"Come over to the library," he said, to him, "and we will enjoy a cigar together."

M. Jacquette raised his two hands in protest.

"To your library and your company — yes. To smoke your cigar — no. But if you will permit, I will roll a cigarette and inhale its fragrance."

"As you please," said the master of Hedgewater House with a weariness he could not entirely conceal.

The two men started off together and as they reached the door the Colonel paused for a moment to speak to me.

"Garland, if you don't mind, you might stay here for awhile and become familiar with the arrangement of these things. I'll join you before luncheon."

"Very well," I replied.

They passed down the covered passageway and it seemed to me that the stoop in the soldierly figure of Colonel Wharton was a little more pronounced. Jules Jacquette, on the other hand, skipped along with a lightness of step and an exuberance of manner that furnished a striking contrast to his companion. As they reached the far end of the walk Jacquette paused, and, looking back at me, waved his hand gayly.

"By-by, my young friend, but we shall meet again. And maybe that time I can think of some fitting rejoinder to the magnificent compliment which you have paid to poor me."

I closed the door and turned to my preliminary work with something like a sigh. There was nothing out of the way in anything I had seen or heard and yet somehow I could not rid myself of the feeling that Colonel Wharton was in trouble and that the masterful Jacquette was the cause of that trouble. What could it be? The Colonel was wealthy, comfortable and beyond the reach of ordinary woes. His health was uncertain, but that

was to be expected in a man who had reached his years. I tried to forget this and to turn my attention to the wonderful things in the unusual collections. But I was only partially successful.

Why?

It did not take long to answer that question. Dora Wharton was the cause of my distraction. Dora Wharton was the cause of the interest and sympathy which I felt in the affairs of her uncle. Her face came constantly between me and my work. I opened the pages of one of the rare first editions printed in the quaint type of the long ago. It was not illustrated but from between the words rose the face of Dora Wharton. The quizzical eyes and the smiling lips were just as distinct as if she were there in the flesh. I closed the book sharply. I felt, with a sense of self-reproach, that I was badly smitten. But in a little while I became engrossed in my work and forgot everything except the fascinating objects that lay before me. I turned from the books to the coins and finally to the gems. I do not know how long I worked there, but I was finally roused by the voice of Colonel Wharton exclaiming:

"Come on, young man; don't you think it's time you had some nourishment?"

I glanced at my watch. It was long past one

o'clock. The curiosities of the collection fascinated me and made me oblivious of the passage of time. It was not hard now to understand how a man like Colonel Wharton, advanced in years, and made solitary by the loss of friends and relatives, should become obsessed with this pursuit for the rare, and the sometimes unobtainable. I called out that I would be with him in a minute, and in that time I made a final rapid survey of the gems. After that I joined him at the door.

"Colonel," I said, with some anxiety, "are all of your gems in that room?"

"All that I actually own," he replied, with the emphasis on the last two words.

But at the time I overlooked the tone of his voice in the satisfaction I felt in his reply.

The Red Diamond was not in the collection of gems in the museum.

That fact gave me indescribable pleasure because I had been hoping from the time I first met Dora Wharton that I would not find it in her uncle's possession.

CHAPTER V

THE MAN BEHIND THE HEDGE

We all met for the first time at luncheon. It was then that I had my first glimpse of Victor Jayne. He was thin and languid, with long hair and a stringy mustache and a disposition to be very careful about his dress. Colonel Wharton sat at the head of the table and in the capacity of host endeavored to keep the conversational ball rolling. He succeeded, measurably, and in this he was ably seconded by Jules Jacquette. The latter's vivacity was amazing. He talked almost constantly — and I must admit that he talked well.

But it was not in the conversation alone that he excelled. There was something about his personality which made it inevitable that he should take and hold the center of the stage. He was persuasive, he was compelling, and he was masterful. The moment he spoke the others listened. They may or they may not have been interested in his conversation, but they paid him the tribute of perfect silence. Victor Jayne had little to say and

that little he addressed to Dora Wharton. Indeed, his eyes were upon her during the greater part of the meal. How do I know? Because my eyes, also, were upon her.

The fact that I was able to see and talk to Dora Wharton kept the fires of my affection at the burning point. It is all very poetic to say that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but it is not to be compared with constant intercourse with one for whom you have a positive and unmistakable love. And I had a positive and unmistakable love for Dora. Any doubt on that point was removed by the spasm of pain which I felt when I detected Jayne smiling at Dora, and smiling, too, in a familiar and confidential manner.

I was not only in love, but I was jealous in the bargain.

It relieved me when the meal was over. The sight of those two glancing at each other in that provoking style and indulging in sweet nothings was too much. It never occurred to me at the time that such a thought on my part was an impertinence. Dora had talked to me kindly; she had treated me considerately, but she had not given any sign which would justify me in thinking that she cared for me in the remotest degree. Clearly I was unreasonable, but that, after all, was only

another proof that I was really and truly in love. For love — human love — as all lovers can testify, is the most unreasonable thing on earth.

As we left the dining-room it was my blissful pleasure to have a few minutes alone with Dora. She asked me what I thought of the collection, whether I was likely to be pleased with the work and other queries along the same line. I was pleased at this evident interest in my work; I was flattered at the attention to my humble self. But later Victor Jayne came along and on some pretext or other managed to take her off to another part of the garden. Before I had an opportunity of mentally berating him for his impudence, I was joined by dear Mrs. Crilly and in a few minutes we were seated together in a rustic arbor discussing Hedgewater Park and its inmates.

"So you think you will be pleased with your employment, do you?" asked the old lady.

"Pleased would be putting it mildly, Mrs. Crilly," I answered. "I am positively enthusiastic about it, and my surroundings, and the people with whom I come in contact only add to the enjoyment."

She shook her head and a shrewd smile came over that young-old face.

"Your enthusiasm is the enthusiasm of youth.

Every turn in the road brings you something new. A smile, a handkerchief, a rose, all may mean the beginning of an adventure to youth. But to old age it is different. We become liberal, broad-minded and philosophical. All of these traits are admirable in themselves, but they are not the things that make the world go round. They are the virtues of old age, the old age which gradually brings detachment from the things of this life. You know," she added, with a rare smile, " at three score years and ten the world grows lonely. The friends of our youth have died or departed and we no longer have the desire or the enthusiasm to make new ones. It is night; the fires of our earthly life are banked, and we are but waiting for the morning, the morning of the day which knows no ending."

Suddenly she broke off with a smile.

" Am I preaching — well, that's one of the results of advancing years. But I'll promise not to do it again. I'll try to talk of the things which interest you."

I smiled in turn and said:

" I envy Colonel Wharton his marvelous collection."

She shook her head at that.

" I don't."

"Surely," I protested, "you can't mean that."

"I mean every word of it," she continued, with unexpected bitterness. "Colonel Wharton is one of the finest men that ever lived. There never was a more loving brother, but I have a haunting fear that this miserable collection may have the effect of undermining his character."

I was puzzled and must have looked it.

"Don't smile at me," the old lady said, "because what I say may sound fantastic and unreal, but I think it is a misfortune to become so passionately attached to inanimate things."

"I'm not smiling," I protested, "but I'm afraid I can't see the point you're trying to make."

She sighed.

"I don't want to be put in the position of finding fault with my brother, but you're like one of the family now, and I can't tell you how much it worries me when I see his intense enthusiasm over his gems."

I tried to laugh lightly, but she disregarded this and continued:

"You have not seen him as I have seen him when he has coveted some rare thing. The desire for possession has been terrifying. When such a fit is on him he would spend the last cent he had to get what he wanted, and if that were not enough

he would beg, borrow or steal to make up the difference. You have probably heard of a youth with such a yearning for knowledge that he would go without his dinner in order to get a needed book. Well, Colonel Wharton's case is somewhat similar to that except that the motive is not so high or lofty. With him it is the desire for possession. I have seen this lust for ancient coins and books and gems in his eyes and it has terrified me. I dread to think of what might happen if there should come a time when he coveted something just out of his reach."

For the first time I began to appreciate the point of view of this wise old woman. Her words took on a new and more significant meaning. It seemed to me that I had heard them before. Suddenly it came to me that I had. Both Bromley Barnes and Collector Fread had spoken to me of this mania for gems on the part of some people. It was an obsession, and an obsession is not easily shaken off. I looked at Mrs. Crilly for some moments in silence and then I said gently:

"Have you ever spoken to Colonel Wharton of your fears in this matter?"

She smiled — a mournful smile.

"Yes, frequently, but without the slightest effect. Did you ever try to make a dipsomaniac

understand the evils of drink? Did you ever preach of the virtue of industry to an indolent man? Did you ever counsel patience to an angry man? Well, the result is about the same in each case. It is love's labor lost."

"Still," I suggested, "Colonel Wharton is a high-minded gentleman."

"Of course he is," she replied warmly, "and in my heart of hearts I feel sure that he may be depended upon to do the right thing. But the mention of those dreadful curiosities always sends me off on a tangent — my fears get the better of my judgment. I suppose it's just a case of a woman's nerves. But now that I've relieved my mind to a sympathetic listener I feel better already. Please do not take my talk too seriously. Forget that I've said anything on the subject."

And with that she was on her feet with the grace and the agility of a miss of sixteen. Her talk was bright and cheerful now, but in spite of that I could not help a slight feeling of depression over what she had said.

For the second time that day I thanked my lucky stars I had not found the Red Diamond in Colonel Wharton's collection.

As I parted with Mrs. Crilly and went to the museum, I noticed that Colonel Wharton had gone

in ahead of me. He was using the telephone as I reached the door and from a few words which I unwittingly overheard I knew that he was talking to his bankers at Phillipsburg.

"You should be able to realize on the bonds at once," he was saying impatiently.

I gently closed the door and left the building because I had no desire to overhear what was obviously a confidential conversation. I took a turn or two about the garden in order to give the Colonel time to finish his talk. Happening to glance in the direction of the entrance to the house I noticed a man in a gray suit lurking in the shadow of the tall hedge. What could be the meaning of his continued presence about the house? What did he want, anyhow? I felt satisfied that it was the same man I had seen on the night of my arrival. I had intended speaking of the incident to Colonel Wharton, but had refrained because it might seem too trivial. Quite possibly it was some one who belonged in the neighborhood. Maybe it was some one employed on the estate. This sight of the man lurking about the hedge stirred me greatly. My impulse was to give the alarm and have him arrested. But the feeling of caution which had prevented me from speaking to the Colonel earlier in the day halted me again. I did not wish to be

placed in the position of giving a false alarm. I did not wish to make myself appear ridiculous.

Nevertheless I felt that something should be done, so I determined to investigate on my own account. I started in the direction of the spot where I had seen the man. A pair of keen eyes were looking at me from over the top of the hedge. I ran for that spot. At the same instant the eyes suddenly disappeared and when I reached there a little later no one was in sight. I made a thorough search of the roadside — and found no one. Much chagrined I walked slowly back to the museum. On the way I passed Victor Jayne arm-in-arm with Dora Wharton. It caused my pulse to beat faster and gave me an acute pain in the region of the heart. He nodded carelessly and she gave me a gracious smile as they proceeded on their way. I felt miserable and knew that I was in for a most unhappy afternoon.

At the door of the museum I met Aunt Sarah. She looked placid enough now, as if she had forgotten all about her conversation earlier in the day. Evidently she had been talking with her brother. But if she was smiling I was still smarting from the sight of Dora Wharton and that impossible Jayne. I felt that the fellow was impertinent and presumptuous. What right did he have to monopo-

lize her society? Unreasonable in me, do you say? Well, I have already said that love was unreasonable. What can I add to that? The desire to express myself could not be resisted.

"Mr.— Mr. Jayne seems to be very attentive to Miss Dora?"

"Yes," she replied, with her shrewd smile, "he does."

"He — he must admire her."

"Most men do," she agreed.

"But — but," I blundered on, not thinking where I might land, "he acts as if he belonged to the favored class."

"Perhaps," she said sweetly, "there may be a reason."

"Reason, reason!" I exclaimed wildly. "What do you mean?"

She was silent for a moment. When she spoke it was in a confidential tone.

"You seem like one of the family. I may speak to you in confidence. Mr. Jayne has formally asked Colonel Wharton for the hand of Dora."

The words came like so many blows in my face. There was a mist before my eyes. I had brought this on myself and now I did not seem to have strength enough to bear it. Mrs. Crilly must have noticed the change in my face, for she said softly:

"You seem disappointed?"

Disappointed! The word was a mockery. To see your fondest hopes dashed to earth. To find the apple of your desire suddenly turned to Dead Sea fruit and then to be asked if you were disappointed! It was ghastly. But the dear old lady meant well. I pulled myself together with a supreme effort of the will, and tried my best to counterfeit a smile.

"I was surprised — that's all."

There was a silence — an awkward silence of some moments, and then I added:

"And Miss Dora? Has she consented?"

"Not yet. Young women of the present day are not to be won so easily. They like to be wooed. Dora is flattered by the proposal, but she asks for time."

Part of the awful load was lifted from my heart. But only part. He was an eligible young man and she was flattered by his proposal. Colonel Wharton evidently wished the match and Aunt Sarah was not against it. The odds seemed to be all in favor of Mr. Victor Jayne. They seemed to be all against Mr. Hugh Garland. In spite of the ray of hope, my heart was like lead.

Suddenly I roused myself from my lethargy. It was unmanly to surrender at the first trumpet of

the opposition. I was young, and with the young all things are possible. It might not be my fate to possess Dora Wharton, but I would have to hear that fate from her own lips. I realized that Mrs. Crilly had left me and that I was standing alone with my hand on the knob of the door of the museum. I saw Jayne crossing the lawn in the direction of the entrance to Hedgewater House. He was alone and he seemed to be in a hurry. As he reached the end of the path some one stepped from behind the tall hedge that surrounded the garden. Colonel Wharton called to me at that moment and I went inside the museum. But a picture remained in my mind.

It was the picture of the mysterious man in gray talking earnestly to Victor Jayne!

CHAPTER VI

THE POOL OF FLAME

AFTER dinner, on the evening of the second day, we all assembled in the library, or living-room, of Hedgewater House. It was a spacious apartment, furnished in good taste. On one side, near the windows overlooking the garden, was a grand piano. On the other side of the room was a large open fireplace, filled with blazing logs to temper the chill of an October evening. Near this open fireplace was a bronze statue of Hercules, and next to that was a small safe belonging to the master of Hedgewater House.

Immediately after dinner Amy Smith, the maid, brought in lamps, for it was the whim of Colonel Wharton not to have gas or electricity in this room. He wished to preserve the illusion and the atmosphere of Colonial times as much as possible. I was thinking of this as the girl came into the room, and glancing at her noticed that her eyes were red from weeping. Mrs. Crilly, who was by my side, caught my unspoken query.

"Poor Amy," she said. "I pity her. The young man she was to marry has lost his money in some foolish way and it has been found necessary to postpone the wedding. She's a good girl; rather illiterate, but absolutely loyal."

I felt a passing pity for the girl too, but my mind soon became engrossed with other things. Colonel Wharton, Jules Jacquette and Victor Jayne came in and took easy-chairs about the crackling fire. The Colonel distributed Pittsburgh stogies, with the "gracious consent of the ladies," as he gallantly phrased it, and the men were soon smoking lazily and discussing masculine subjects.

In the meantime Dora had come in and taken her place by the piano. She played well, and she played the things that touched my heart. I looked at dear Mrs. Crilly and found that she was indulging in the little cat-nap she enjoyed so much after dinner. The coast was clear, so far as I was concerned, so I quietly slipped over and stood by the piano and watched the capable white fingers of Dora Wharton as they touched the keys with a certainty and lightness that filled me with admiration. She looked up as my shadow was cast over the music and a flush of pleasure overspread her countenance. Presently she said with a playful shrug of the shoulders:

"You are at liberty to join Uncle in one of his celebrated stogies — if it pleases you?"

"It pleases me to stay right here — if it does not displease you," I retorted.

I could have sworn she blushed. Maybe it was the reflection from the red lamp shade. Anyhow the conditions were all favorable. The dim light, the soft music, the beautiful girl, all united to fill my heart with an unutterable tenderness. I do not remember all the things I said to her, but I do know that she listened with a pleased manner, all the while accompanying my heart beats on the piano with her gentle touch. What would any man done in my place? It is true that I had only known her for two short days. It is true that I was only an employee of her uncle. What of that? I only know that presently I found myself leaning over and saying, ever so softly:

"I shall treasure this as one of the precious nights of my life."

The music ceased for a moment. Her fingers, slipping from the keys, seemed to tremble. She looked up at me with that quick, graceful movement of the head. There was that quizzical, half-expectant, half-inquiring glance in her black eyes and her smiling lips. The loose strands of her glossy black hair swept my face and filled me with an

indescribable emotion. For a moment she seemed on the point of speaking; then she gave a half sigh and resumed her playing, very soft, low and tender.

That look from her dear eyes — to me — signified the dawn of love.

I felt that she had divined my secret, and I also felt — or at least fervently hoped — that she reciprocated my feelings.

Mrs. Crilly approached at that moment and, for the time being, any intimacy between us was at an end. But I could not keep my eyes off Dora and her manner made me feel that I had touched a responsive chord in her heart. She played less skillfully now. She answered the conversation of Mrs. Crilly in an abstracted manner and when she looked at me and caught my eyes she glanced aside with evident embarrassment.

If these things did not signify love what did they mean?

At that moment I felt that I was the happiest man in the world. And I thanked my lucky stars that Collector Fread and Bromley Barnes had given me an assignment which brought me into contact with Dora Wharton. The remembrance of the reason for being at Hedgewater House brought me to with a sudden start. What right did I have — under the circumstances — to make love to the

girl? My only excuse was that one look into her clear black eyes had made me forget all about my mission. But, fortunately, Mrs. Crilly had approached in time to save me from myself. I had not said anything that an honorable and high-minded man might not say.

From the other side of the room the droning of men's voices could be heard. Aunt Sarah was saying some inconsequential things to Dora. That gave me time to think. My first definite feeling was a feeling of immense gratitude that I had not found the Red Diamond in Colonel Wharton's possession. It was evident that I was on a false scent, or rather that Bromley Barnes had placed me on a false scent. That meant that in a little while I should be recalled from Hedgewater House. Once that happened, and I could speak without prejudice to the interests of the Government, I would declare myself in my real character to Dora Wharton. What would she say? Ah! I was willing to take my chances on that. I loved her and that was all-sufficient.

It has been said that the darkest hour is just before the dawn. Similarly it may be asserted that the brightest moment is just before the crash of our dearest hopes. Never, in all my life, had I felt so happy as I stood there looking down at Dora and

weaving golden dreams of the future. While I was going over this for the tenth time I was aroused from my reverie by the voice of the colored servant announcing:

"Doctah Henderson!"

Little did I dream that the chance appearance of this man was to lead to an incident which was to send my air castles toppling to the earth. Colonel Wharton arose quickly and hurrying across the room greeted the newcomer with great heartiness.

"My dear Doctor, I'm delighted to see you. You're a stranger at Hedgewater House."

"Not my fault, Wharton," was the cheery response. "Too many sick people in this part of the country; keeping me so infernally busy that I don't have time to see my friends."

He paused and looked about the room inquiringly. He had a smooth, florid face and blue eyes, and the eyes twinkled brightly as he caught sight of Dora Wharton. They met midway in the apartment and as he greeted her with one hand he clucked her under the chin with the other, with the familiar manner of a friend of the family.

"Dora," he said, "you're looking prettier tonight than ever and I want you to know that's some compliment."

Indeed, she looked transcendently beautiful, in

my eyes. Her cheeks were flushed and her black orbs sparkled like stars. After Doctor Henderson had talked with her for some moments he was presented to the others and finally sprawled his big frame in an easy-chair. He lit the weed that was handed him, and then leaning back in the cushions luxuriously, he exclaimed, looking at Colonel Wharton:

"Now, neighbor, amuse me!"

In the laugh that followed, Colonel Wharton asked his visitor what sort of entertainment he preferred. Doctor Henderson looked at his host fixedly for a moment and then said:

"Well, to tell the truth, Wharton, I've had a dispute, and I thought you could help me to settle it."

"About what?" asked Colonel Wharton, with an amused smile.

"About diamonds."

Instantly Colonel Wharton straightened up and was all attention.

"Well?"

"It was a question concerning which was the greatest diamond in the world. I insisted that it was the Koh-i-noor, that magnificent mountain of light which passed through the hands of so many rulers before it was finally given to Queen Victoria in 1850."

The Colonel nodded his head gravely.

"The Koh-i-noor," he admitted, "was a great diamond, but I do not believe it was or is the greatest in the world."

"How about the Cullinnan?" piped up Victor Jayne from his place in the corner.

The Colonel chuckled.

"That's like a tailor — it has nine lives. When it was found in South Africa in 1905 it was the size of a man's fist. It was the intention of the Transvaal Government to present it to King Edward VII, but it has since been cut up into nine parts and for that reason has ceased to interest diamond experts."

Jules Jacquette lifted his massive head from a reclining position.

"If I may be pardoned," he said, "I think you gentlemen are both wide of the mark. What do you mean by the greatest diamond in the world? Do you mean the most valuable one, counted in dollars and cents? Do you mean the rarest one? And do you speak of white diamonds alone?"

"Why," came the voice of Aunt Sarah, "I never knew that there was any color but white. Of course I know that some look yellow, but I supposed the flaws —"

"Your diamond education," interrupted Jacquette suavely but with irony, "has evidently been sadly neglected. The Great Mogul is rose colored; the Florentine, now in the royal house of Austria, a bright yellow; the Dresden Green, owned by the King of Saxony, a clear apple green color, and the Hope Diamond you will recall as being of a sapphire-blue color."

Doctor Henderson peered at the speaker curiously from behind his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"We seem to have an expert in our midst," he said drily.

Jacquette rose, placed his hand on his heart and bowed low.

"A compliment from the great doctor is a compliment indeed."

The Doctor did not notice the last remark, but addressed himself to Colonel Wharton.

"I have insisted that there is no such thing as a perfect red diamond."

"Ah, that is where the famous doctor is wrong. I—"

It was Jules Jacquette who had broken into the conversation. But he stopped as suddenly as he had started and seemed sorry he had spoken.

Colonel Wharton was exhibiting signs of excite-

ment. All of those in the room had grouped themselves about the speakers.

"What were you going to say?" asked Doctor Henderson of the South American.

"Nothing, Monsieur, nothing," was his unblushing response.

"I believe you are a Brazilian," pursued the medical man.

Again that profound obeisance.

"I have that great honor, Monsieur."

"Well, there was a famous red diamond that was found in the mines of Brazil. I —"

Colonel Wharton's hands had been twitching nervously. He paced the room and then abruptly broke into the conversation.

"You mean the Star of the South, doctor?"

"Exactly — do you know anything about it?"

"I know everything."

The impressive manner in which this was said riveted every eye on the master of Hedgewater House. He spoke now in a tone of suppressed excitement.

"The Star of the South was cut into two equal parts. One part is in the National Museum in Rio Janeiro. The other passed from hand to hand and is now in this country. These two stones are the only perfect red diamonds in existence."

"That sounds a little like a fairy tale," laughed the Doctor. "How is it," he added, "that if it's in this country you haven't added it to your collection?"

"I have!"

Everybody started at these two words. They rang out, in the tense silence of the room, like two sharp pistol shots. It is impossible to adequately describe the effect they had on me. I wondered if the Colonel were in his right senses. If so, his words meant that I had been living in a fool's paradise. It was evident that the others were as much amazed as myself. Jules Jacquette arose and placed his hand warningly on Wharton's sleeve. He turned to Henderson with an insincere smile on his lips.

"The Colonel is just having his little jest with us. Why not finish our cigars in the garden?"

But Wharton angrily pushed the South American from him. At the same moment the Doctor's voice rang out:

"Wharton, you can't bluff me. If you've got the Red Diamond produce it!"

Even then I hoped against hope that he did not have the stone. Every one in the group leaned forward expectantly. I could see Dora, her face white, and her lips parted.

Without another word the Colonel droppec down on his knees on the floor and we could see him fumbling with the combination of the safe His long thin fingers trembled, but he did not hesi tate for a moment. Presently there was a clicking sound and the heavy door of the safe was thrown open. He reached in one of the compartments anc drew forth a large, square case. He stood erect the thing in his hand. His face was waxen anc there was a wild glare in his eyes — almost a maniacal glare. The Brazilian made a move as if to restrain him, and then, seeing that fierce look drew back. The Colonel spoke:

"Gentlemen, the Star of the South!"

He touched a spring, the lid sprang open and the half darkened room was filled with a ray of light It was like a pool of flame. Never before nor since have I looked upon such a brilliant thing. It was blinding, dazzling, overpowering and its refulgence made me gasp for breath!

After the first shock I could see that the setting in its magnificence, matched the stone. It was a worthy frame for an incomparable diamond. It was of gold, in the form of a sunburst, with sharp pointed edges. The Colonel shut the lid sharply stooped down, replaced it in its receptacle and then closed the safe.

I can only describe the intensity of those few moments by saying that not a word, not a sound, came from any of those present while this strange performance was in progress.

CHAPTER VII

DORA RECEIVES A LETTER

WHILE Colonel Wharton was stooping over in the act of closing the safe, and before he rose to his feet, I happened to look up and thought I saw a face flattened against the window pane, gazing in at the performance with fascinated interest. I made my way there in two or three quick strides — and found nothing. Was it a figment of my imagination? Possibly. My mind was in a whirl, and I was fully capable of seeing things, as the saying goes.

When I stepped back to the far side of the room, Doctor Henderson and the others had resumed their seats and Colonel Wharton was talking to them in a voice that still quivered with excitement. He tried to appear at ease, but I could see that a restraint had come over the entire party.

For the first time since I met him, Jules Jacquette was plainly flustered. This estimable Brazilian rubbed his hand across the bristles of his closely shaven head and scowled furiously at the burning

logs. Usually he dominated the conversation, but now he was content to be still and think. Occasionally he bit his finger nails and knitted his bushy eyebrows. And, almost constantly, he beat a tattoo with his small feet.

The others seemed to be similarly affected. Doctor Henderson looked as if he were sorry he had introduced the subject, while Victor Jayne kept his eyes glued upon Jules Jacquette as if to get his cue from the Brazilian. Aunt Sarah was plainly perturbed, and Dora's lips twitched as if it were all she could do to keep from bursting into tears.

And how about myself? Ah, I fear that my poor words would not begin to describe my emotions. The thing I had hoped and prayed might not happen had actually come to pass. Colonel Wharton was the possessor of a rare diamond that had been smuggled through the custom lines and I — Hugh Garland — was pledged to the Government of the United States to recover that diamond and to bring the offender to justice. Every one in the room realized that the Colonel had been guilty of a serious indiscretion in exhibiting the diamond — that is, everybody but the Colonel. That, to my mind, was the one thing in his favor. A guilty man could not act with such childlike innocence. And yet his action in keeping it locked from view

was suspicious to say the least. How did he get it? And where did he get it? These were two questions which it was my duty to ask him.

But the most agonizing part of the business was the effect it might have upon my future relations with Dora Wharton. I loved her, how deeply was only becoming evident now that I had reached the parting of the ways. I could not bear the thought of giving her up. Yet how could I go on weaving the net of guilt about her uncle and at the same time expect to win and retain her affection? The question was too deep and too perplexing. And, worst of all, what would she think of me when she discovered that I was a Special Agent of the United States Treasury placed in the house of a man who was more than a father to her? I covered my face with my hands and made no attempt to answer that mental query. I was roused from my stupor by hearing the voice of Colonel Wharton talking in the grandiloquent tone of a professional lecturer. He had recovered his self-possession and was now in the boastful mood of the collector who has gained a coveted prize.

"Gentlemen," he was saying, "it is needless to say what I have shown you has been shown you in confidence — for the present. In the meanwhile you see before you a man who possesses the only

rare diamond in the world not owned by royalty. The Koh-i-noor, as you have heard, is a possession of the English crown; the Excelsior or Jubilee Diamond belonged to Queen Victoria; the Great Mogul to one of the princes of India; the Florentine is in the jewel box of the Royal House of Austria; the Lancy, cut for Charles the Bold, was afterwards owned by Queen Elizabeth; the Dresden Green is in the treasure chest of the King of Saxony; and the Star of the South — one of the only two perfect red diamonds in existence — is in the possession of Basil Wharton!"

He paused, as if to hear the applause, but none came, and the poor gentleman, ringing the bell, ordered the servant to serve the gentlemen with sherry.

While this was going on I tried to map out a plan of action for myself. My final instructions from Bromley Barnes bade me consult with him before taking any definite action. My business was to locate the diamond and then inform him of the fact. He had arranged his movements so that I might reach him at any hour of the day or night. I could not leave Hedgewater House at this critical stage of the proceedings and yet I must communicate with Barnes. I knew there was a telephone in the hallway adjoining the living-room and I re-

solved to use it. Leaving my place without attracting attention I went to the enclosure and called the number of the veteran investigator. To my satisfaction he answered himself.

"What news?" he asked.

"The stars are shining," I responded.

That was the form that had been agreed upon between us, and it meant "I have seen the Red Diamond."

From the pause that ensued I could tell that this news had caught his breath.

"Do you think they will shine until morning?" he asked, presently.

"Yes," I replied.

"Do you want me now?"

"No."

"All right," was the contented conclusion. "I'll see you in the morning."

When I resumed my place the gentlemen were still sipping their sherry. I had not been missed. I was sure I had not been overheard at the telephone, but even if I had been no one in the house would understand my cryptic remarks. Dora was at the piano, but one could see with half an eye that she was dreadfully disturbed. She started to play something, but stopped in the midst of it and left the instrument. She passed the window which

overlooked the garden to come over to our side of the room. Suddenly she gave a scream, a cry of terror. I ran just in time to prevent her from falling to the floor. Mrs. Crilly and the others were at her side in an instant.

"What is it, dear?" asked the old lady anxiously.

"Oh, it's nothing, Aunt Sarah," she replied with a half sob. "I'm just nervous and overwrought."

She recovered with astonishing quickness, and when Colonel Wharton urged her to go to her own room and rest she declined, saying:

"I'm ashamed of myself for causing you such annoyance and just to prove that I am all right I shall play your favorite selection."

Thereupon she sat down at the piano and played the wedding march from Lohengrin with a dash and abandon that elicited the hearty applause of all the guests. I stood by the side of the piano and my feelings were feelings of mingled joy and sorrow. Two hours before and I would have been transported with delight at this suggestive selection, but now it filled me with misgivings and seemed to be a mockery of my hopes.

Worst of all, when she spoke to me it was in a strained and unnatural tone. To add to the misery of it all my replies were confused and disconnected.

Once she glanced at me out of those questioning eyes and I was utterly unable to return her glance. Luckily, Aunt Sarah came up at that moment and urged her to retire for the night. That gave me time to recover my self-possession. Dora, with the perversity of her sex, insisted that she was all right and the dear old lady was compelled to abandon her entreaties. As Mrs. Crilly moved away I turned to Dora with a trace of anxiety in my voice.

"Have you really recovered?"

"Yes," she answered in a low tone.

There were several moments of strained silence between us. Presently she looked up at me with that candor for which her black eyes were distinguished.

"I suppose you are curious to know the cause of my foolish outburst?"

"I am."

"Well," she said, dropping her voice, "as I passed the window I imagined I saw a man peering into the room. I could not control myself — and so I screamed."

"Quite natural," I commented, more disturbed than I was willing to admit. I, too, had imagined a face at the window, but I did not mention it to Dora because it would only cause her unnecessary alarm.

"I'm sure I was mistaken," she continued, "but I'd be glad if you would take a turn around the veranda. I don't want to speak of it to Uncle because he is not himself to-night."

I cheerfully undertook the mission because I was just as anxious as the girl to discover if any one had been eavesdropping during the time the Red Diamond was being exhibited to the company. Colonel Wharton was engaged in a noisy discussion about local politics so that I was able to slip out of the house unobserved. The porches were deserted. The moon was shining brightly so that it was possible to get a good view of the grounds. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere. To make sure I made a hasty trip around the house but without result. Dora was waiting for me and when I made my report she seemed greatly relieved.

"It's just a case of a woman's nerves," she laughed. "Please forget about it."

I promised, of course, but it was easier said than done. The series of events of the evening had unsettled me and the probable consequences of the incidents filled me with gloomy forebodings.

If Dora still felt depressed she managed to conceal the fact very cleverly. She joined Mrs. Crilly and the gentlemen, and in a short while no one would have imagined that the serenity of the occa-

sion had been so rudely disturbed only a short time before.

Jules Jacquette occupied the center of the stage for the remainder of the evening. He seemed to interest Doctor Henderson immensely, and his consciousness of that fact caused him to be more voluble than usual. The talk drifted to travel and the Brazilian told of some of the places he had visited. He became positively eloquent, and while he talked he gesticulated freely with his wonderful hands. I could not take my eyes off those hands. Some people express themselves with their eyes, but if M. Jacquette had remained mute he could still have made himself understood with those expressive hands. They were large, as I have said, but they were not clumsy or unwieldy. They ran the gamut of the emotions. They were violent and they were gentle; they were harsh and they were soft; they were quiet and they were demonstrative, but always, to me, they were eager, greedy hands, expressing the character of their owner.

Victor Jayne had less to say than any one in the room. Once or twice he attempted to make conversation with Dora Wharton, but received such scant encouragement that he soon gave it up for a bad job. So he remained huddled up in an armchair, stroking his long, stringy mustache and

smoking one cigarette after another. I wondered if it were possible that Dora could feel any attachment to such a languid person.

Colonel Wharton was himself again. With the closing of the door of the safe he seemed to have shut up his evil genii. He became perfectly normal. The wild look left his eyes and with it the unnatural excitement that had been produced by the exhibition of the Red Diamond. When the talk left the subject of coins and gems he was the quiet, self-possessed gentleman that might be expected to preside over such a splendid establishment. There was something aristocratic about this tall, slight, stoop-shouldered man. Occasionally there came that abstracted air which became him so well and separated him from the run of commonplace men. I learned that he had won an enviable distinction while defending his country as a soldier, and I believe there was a saber cut on the forehead which came at a moment when he was leading his regiment into action. But the cut was concealed by the way in which he brushed his hair and no one presumed to speak of it in his presence.

It must have been after eleven o'clock when Doctor Henderson arose to say good-night. He declared that he had spent a most enjoyable evening, although there must have been a mental reservation

during those few moments when Colonel Wharton was holding up the Red Diamond to the gaze of his startled friends. He said good-by with great affability to all of the men and he went so far as to kiss Dora on the cheek. He called her his little girl, which was no misstatement, for I learned that he had known and loved her from her infancy. Colonel Wharton escorted him to the door and then rejoined his guests about the open fireplace.

It was then that an incident occurred which caused me further uneasiness. Amy Smith, the maid, came into the room with a letter in her hand. It seemed strange to me that the girl should be up and about at such a late hour. She looked around until her gaze fell upon Dora Wharton, and then instead of going to her mistress, as might be expected, she beckoned Dora toward the doorway. Miss Wharton responded and there was a subdued conversation between the two, Dora nodding her head in acquiescence. The maid left the room and Dora went over near one of the lamps and hastily tore the flap of the envelope which the maid had given her. She pulled the note paper from its covering and read it with apparent haste and eagerness.

"Oh!" she exclaimed to herself and put her hand to her heart.

I was in a position where I could see her face

distinctly and I saw it turn pale. There was a look of anguish in her black eyes and she gave every evidence of a woman in deep distress. I yearned to go over to her and take her in my arms and to beg her to confide in me. But that was obviously out of the question. While I looked I heard the group of men breaking up preparatory to retiring for the night. There was nothing left for me except to do likewise. In going toward the stairway I passed near where Dora was standing. The note was crushed between her clenched fingers. As I approached she hastily thrust it into the bosom of her dress and held out her hand to me.

"Good night," she said in a low, weak voice. "I'm glad we have you with us."

I passed up the stairway slowly and as I reached the second landing I glanced back. She was still standing there with a look of unutterable woe in her black eyes. I reached my room feeling very miserable.

What was in that letter to cause her so much grief?

Where had it come from at that unusual hour?

My harassed brain refused to answer either question.

CHAPTER VIII

BEHIND GREAT HERCULES

I WAS in no mood for sleep, so I sat by the west window gazing alternately at the waters of the Harmony River and looking over the grounds surrounding Hedgewater House. The windows were so situated that I could see the one as readily as the other. The moon was under a cloud and the waters of the river looked dark and sluggish. The grounds about the house seemed desolate. There was a stiff breeze blowing and the dead leaves rustled about the walks with a mournfulness that matched the sadness in my heart.

How was I to face the ordeal of the morrow? Barnes would come to see me and give me further instructions concerning the Red Diamond. Suppose he should order me to confiscate it in the name of the United States Government? Worse still, suppose he should instruct me to take Colonel Wharton into custody on the charge of smuggling? How would I appear in the eyes of Dora Wharton?

Surely she would despise me. But my duty? Ah, there was the rub! To perform my duty, to win the temporary approbation of the Department, and, in doing so, to lose life-long happiness. What a predicament for a man to be placed in; what a cruel test of loyalty to love and devotion to duty!

As I stood by the window watching the waters I tried to review the series of events which had brought me in my present position. I thought of my studies in coins and precious stones, and of how I had worked as an examiner in the office of the Appraiser of Customs and how eagerly I had looked forward to my appointment as a special agent of the Treasury Department.

Well, I had won the appointment and here I was, with my first case staring me in the face. Yet I was unhappy. Need I say why? The thought of Dora Wharton's scorn filled me with a sort of fear. I would willingly have faced death in the performance of my duty, but how could I stand the withering glance of her honest eyes? I tried to see myself from every possible point of view in the hope of finding some extenuating circumstances in my present plight.

What did I look like in the eyes of my friends? They regarded me as a bright, clever, industrious servant of the Government. They felt sure that I

would do my duty under any and all circumstances. I know they constantly dwelt upon my fine sense of honor and upon the depths of my loyalty to my superiors. This was the strain in which Bromley Barnes talked about me, and I know that he had filled Collector Fread with the same notions.

How would I look in the eyes of Colonel Wharton and Dora and Aunt Sarah? With the best feeling in the world they could not think of me except with a feeling of detestation. They would consider me in the light of a spy and an ingrate. The words made me shudder; but there was no escape from them — at least not in the minds of these confiding people. They would feel that I had come to them under false pretenses, that I had won their regard only to abuse it.

How did I look in my own eyes? If I went to the mirror I would see a clean-shaven, comely-looking young fellow of twenty-seven, full of life and energy and ready for any adventure. That was pleasing enough so far as the exterior man went. But how did I feel in my heart? Ah, that was a different question. I knew my intentions were good. I knew the work I was doing was in the interest of law and order and for the integrity of the Government. Under ordinary circumstances I would have felt proud of the part I was playing,

but with Dora Wharton in the case the circumstances were anything but ordinary.

I roused myself from these reveries with a start and looking at my watch discovered that it was nearly one o'clock in the morning. I scolded myself for not going to bed. I might sit up until morning without being able to change white to black and vice versa. A night's sleep might solve the whole problem to my own satisfaction — if not to that of others. Before retiring I left my apartment and walked to the bathroom at the end of the corridor. On returning I noticed a dim light in the great living-room on the lower floor. I paid no attention to that, but as I was about to reenter my bed chamber I heard a rustling sound below.

Some one was in the living-room!

Thoroughly aroused, I tiptoed to the side of the banister. The faint light came from a lamp on one of the tables. The great room looked ghostlike in that semi-darkness. The wood in the open fireplace was still smoldering and the chairs in front of it were arranged in a semi-circle just as they had been left two hours before. From my place on the second floor I could see the edge of the little writing desk and next to it the iron safe, with its bright coat of varnish faintly reflecting the dim light of

the lamp. And, looming above them all, was the giant statue of Hercules. It was possible to get a view of the door leading into the room and of the windows overlooking the garden. They were all closed. It was not likely that any one could have entered from the outside. A dead quiet pervaded the place and I began to wonder if I had not been mistaken. Nevertheless I waited, determined to reassure myself before retiring for the night.

Presently I caught the flash of a light. I looked and looked, and, after a while, made the discovery that some one was huddled up against the large statue of Hercules, near the foot of the stairs. There was a faint sound as of some one breathing heavily. Mentally I damned the statue for obstructing my view and at the same time furnishing such a convenient refuge for the intruder. Even at that moment I wondered at the whim which had caused Colonel Wharton to place such a clumsy and inappropriate thing in his living-room. Also, at the same moment I speculated idly upon the twelve great labors Hercules is supposed to have undertaken. Was any one of them as nerve-racking as the job I had on hand? Were his struggles against the embodiments of evil to be compared with my fight to reconcile love and duty? Another movement from the person below aroused me from my

useless meditations. I could reach but one conclusion.

Some one was preparing to open the safe and steal the Red Diamond.

I determined that it was my duty to act. In less time than it takes to relate the fact I had hurried to my room, possessed myself of my revolver and returned to my post of observation. I determined to move with caution and not to arouse the house unless it was absolutely necessary. The person by the statue had not moved during my brief absence. Whoever it was seemed quite as fearful as myself.

Presently the flash of light became more pronounced and I realized that the intruder was proceeding cautiously around the side of the room and in the direction of the safe. Then, suddenly, I made an astonishing discovery.

It was a woman!

Almost unconsciously I put my revolver away, but remained at my post looking over the rail at the strange figure below. She was clad in a blue bathrobe, which had evidently been hastily thrown over her night dress. Her long hair, loose and in disorder, flowed down her back, and in her hand she carried a candlestick containing a lighted waxen taper. I pinched myself to make sure that it was not all a dream. But it was real enough — only

too real. The woman was in her bare feet and she tiptoed and moved with provoking slowness, pausing every now and then to make sure that no one was in the room. Presently she reached her destination, and placing the candle on the top of the safe stooped down and began to fumble with the knob.

Suddenly there came a puff of wind — from where I could not guess — and extinguished the candle.

"Oh!" came the half-suppressed cry from the woman, and then all was silence.

I never moved. The silence continued for a long while and then I heard the scratching of a match and the candle was relighted.

The woman looked around nervously before resuming operations. Seeing no one, she began turning the knob of the safe, but evidently with poor success. Did she know the combination, or was she working at random?

All the while I stood there, dazed with astonishment at this strange performance. I was wondering who she could be. So far as I knew there were but three women in the house, Mrs. Crilly, Dora Wharton and Amy Smith, the maid, and the thought of any of these in connection with the midnight wanderer was quickly dismissed. Could

it be possible that there was some one else in the house of whose presence I was unaware?

My impulse was to go downstairs, seize the thief and demand to know what she was doing. But the desire to see how far she would go held me in my place. Unconsciously, however, I walked to the head of the stairway and down one step in order to get a better view. At that moment the troublesome bolts yielded to her touch and the door of the safe flew open. In my excitement I leaned forward and a loose board in the stairway gave a loud creak.

Instantly I drew back so that I could not be seen from below. But the woman at the safe was terribly scared. She recoiled and almost fell to the floor. As she regained her position she turned her face to me for the first time and what I saw gave me a shock that made my heart palpitate and my brain reel.

It was Dora Wharton!

There could be no possible doubt about her identity. She was standing now, holding the candlestick in her hand and gazing about to learn the cause of the unexpected creaking. The candle threw its waxen light on her face and never have I seen a face so full of pain and suffering. It was Dora and it was not Dora. The Dora I knew was young, full of life and vivacity, with a quizzical

look in her black eyes and smiling lips. The woman by the safe looked haggard from terror, the gaze in her eyes was that of a criminal caught in the act, and her lips were unsmiling and contracted. Yet, in spite of the contrast, which made her look like another person, I knew only too well that it was the one and only Dora Wharton who was destined to have such an influence over my life.

I waited in breathless silence to see what she would do next. Suddenly she closed the door of the safe and snuffed out the candle and I knew that she was slowly making her way along the staircase.

There was only one thing for me to do and that was to return to my room. If my mind had been filled with perplexities in the beginning of the evening it was more so now. I locked the door and began to undress slowly and with my mind on what I had seen in the living-room. I conjured up a dozen reasons for Dora Wharton's appearance at that hour and under those circumstances, but none of them satisfied me. Was it not possible that she might have overlooked some little trinket and gone down to the safe to get it before retiring? Yes, but it was not probable. Why should she creep downstairs in her bare feet like a thief in the night?

Finally, in despair, I threw myself into the bed and tried to sleep. But sleep did not seem to be

for me. I tossed and rolled and twisted the pillows into all conceivable shapes. Once I felt like getting up and trying a book, but I knew perfectly well that I could not read under the circumstances. Finally I fell into a sort of stupor that was akin to sleep. While in that state I thought I heard a pistol shot in the distance. Was I awake or was I asleep at the time? Was it part of a dream or was it a reality? While I was debating this I dropped off into a troubled slumber.

CHAPTER IX

MORE MYSTERY

I AWOKE from my troubled sleep early the next morning and found the sun shining in the window of my bedroom. Ordinarily that is the augury of a cheerful day, but the weight of misgiving that lay on my heart made me anything but a happy man. I had to face the most trying day of my life, and how I was going to come out of it was more than I could guess. My head ached and my eyes were blurred, but through the fog of doubt and perplexity I could always see the face of Dora Wharton.

I dressed and went downstairs and had the unhappiness to breakfast alone. No one to look at, no one to talk to; nothing to distract me from my thoughts. The maid informed me that Miss Wharton was too ill to leave her room and that the others did not care for breakfast. Surely an extraordinary state of affairs! And the appearance and manner of Amy Smith in conveying me this bit of information did not add to the hilarity of the occasion. Her eyes were red from weeping,

her hair was frowsy and disheveled, and she looked as if she had not slept during the night. When I spoke to her she answered in an absent-minded way that provoked my ire. I spoke sharply to her and she seemed to be on the verge of tears.

What sort of a house could this be? No one in it seemed normal.

I barely tasted my breakfast and took a turn or two in the garden in the hope of reviving my drooping spirits. But the picture of the girl in the blue bath robe kneeling in front of the safe kept constantly recurring to my mind. And with it was the terrified look on the face of Dora Wharton as she glanced around that silent room. What explanation would she make? What explanation could she make?

While these thoughts were racing through my mind I came face to face with her in the garden. Her cheeks were as white as chalk and there were rings under her eyes. Instinctively I pitied her and I tried to form words that would express that feeling. But she did not give me the chance. She saw me but she did not look at me. She gave some mumbled words of greeting, drew her skirts to one side, as if she did not want to come in contact with me, and hurried into the living-room.

My impulse was to go after her and demand an

explanation. But what right did I have to do that? Possibly my official position would have been a sufficient justification, but if I spoke to her at all it would be simply as Hugh Garland, who had now reached the stage where he adored the ground on which she walked.

Yes, I loved her in spite of the fact that appearances were against her, and that I had been placed in the position of watching her as well as the other members of the household.

While I was indulging in these thoughts I was interrupted by the entrance of Doctor Henderson. The appearance of this rosy-cheeked wholesome person was like a breath of fresh air. He was so transparently honest that he restored one's belief in the goodness of human nature. He fairly beamed at me through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"My boy," he cried cheerily, "how are you feeling this bright sunshiny morning?"

I was shameless enough to say that I was well and happy.

"How could you feel any other way on such a delightful day?" he retorted.

If he could have seen the desolation in my heart he would have had an answer.

"Where's Wharton?" he asked. "I want to speak to him."

I told him I had not yet seen the Colonel and that I feared he was slightly under the weather.

He looked at me intently for some moments and then he said in his rapid-fire style:

"See here, Garland; you look like a sensible fellow and there's no reason why I shouldn't talk to you. It's about —"

"About the Red Diamond," I interrupted.

"Precisely," he admitted. "But how in all creation did you guess that?"

"Probably," I explained, "because it's been on my mind, too."

"Just so, just so," he nodded, rubbing his hands together. "Now the purpose of my visit this morning is to advise Wharton to get rid of that Red Diamond. It's absurd to have a thing like that in a private collection. Why, I wouldn't have it in the house. I'd feel that I was in as much danger as if I were sitting on a keg of dynamite smoking a cigarette — not," he added with a quaint smile, "that I would smoke a cigarette any more than I would sit on a keg of dynamite."

"I understand you perfectly," I said.

"Good, good!" he ejaculated. "It's such a pleasure to be understood. Most people are misunderstood — especially doctors."

The appearance of the head of the house, at that

moment, in a long dressing-gown and a skull cap caused Henderson to smile.

"Speak of the devil," he said, advancing and extending his hand, "and he's sure to appear."

Colonel Wharton looked tired and jaded, like all the other members of the household. He smiled wanly.

"What's on your mind, Doctor?"

"That devilish diamond of yours, sir. I'll feel happier if you get rid of it as soon as possible."

The Colonel's eyes lighted up as they always did when his gems were mentioned.

"Superstitious?" he asked.

"Not superstitious, but fearful. I don't see how you can rest while it is in the house."

Wharton looked at him, in silence, for several moments.

"Come," he said presently, "and see what it looks like in daytime."

He went into the living-room and we followed him. He got down on one knee in front of the safe. Henderson watched him curiously, but my nerves were so tense that I could have screamed. The Colonel was shaky and it was some time before he hit on the combination. Presently I heard the bolts fall and he pulled the door open and reached inside the safe. He seemed disappointed and then

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went on both knees and peered into the little compartments. His naturally pale face became waxen and he fell back with a groan:

"Gone!" he murmured feebly. "The diamond's gone!"

Doctor Henderson looked at me with amazement depicted upon his honest face. He assisted Colonel Wharton to a chair and I rushed out of the room and brought him a glass of water. While he sipped it the Doctor went down on all fours and fumbled in the safe. In a few moments he arose, looking very grave.

"He's right," he said simply, "it's not there."

Mrs. Crilly came in and I told her what had happened. She gave a shrill scream which aroused the household. In a little while Jules Jacquette, Victor Jayne and some of the servants had come into the room. There were confused explanations during which each one gazed blankly at his neighbor. Dora Wharton was the last one to arrive and I noticed that she remained apart from the others and did not look in the safe or ask any questions. Her face had the pallor of death and there was agony in her eyes.

If ever guilt was depicted upon the countenance of a human being it showed itself on the face of Dora Wharton.

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At that moment my supreme desire was to take her in my arms and tell her that I would defend her against the world.

But I could say nothing; do nothing.

Jules Jacquette looked at Colonel Wharton intently and asked him if any one but himself knew the combination of the safe, but the master of Hedgewater House stared at the Brazilian vacantly — and said nothing. Some one else asked him a question but the Colonel made no reply. He was dazed and moved around the room as if bereaved of his senses. When he was able to speak it was only to say to himself:

"Terrible! Terrible!"

At this stage of the proceedings Jacquette demonstrated his forcefulness by practically taking charge of things. He looked disturbed — quite as much disturbed as any one in the room — but he did not lose his self-possession.

"Doctor Henderson," he said in a tone of authority, "our good friend the Colonel needs your kind offices. Won't you please look after him?"

The physician looked surprised at this command, but he evidently realized its reasonableness, for he took Colonel Wharton aside and began to write out a prescription for him. While he was doing this Jacquette turned to Jayne and said quietly:

"See that no one leaves the house."

As Jayne left the room the Brazilian next turned to me:

"Were you here when Colonel Wharton opened the safe?"

I resented his assumption of authority and was about to make some sharp retort, but changed my mind and said:

"Yes."

"Did you know the combination of the safe?"

"No!" I exclaimed sharply.

"I trust," he said suavely, but with the suggestion of irony in his tone, "that I have not offended my young friend. Is it unreasonable to suppose that the secretary of Colonel Wharton should know the combination of Colonel Wharton's safe?"

"No," I admitted, "but it happens that I am not Colonel Wharton's secretary. My business is simply to classify his collection of coins and gems."

"A distinction without a difference," he said in his oiliest tones. "My young friend is over-modest. That is all."

I could have punched him for his impudence in putting me in the wrong. I chafed over his examination because I felt that I should be the man to do the cross-questioning and that he should be

on the defensive. Yet my time had not come. For the present, at least, I could not afford to reveal myself in my official character.

Doctor Henderson joined us at that moment, followed by Colonel Wharton, who seemed to have partially recovered.

"Gentlemen," said the Doctor, "it seems to me that we are losing valuable time. Why hasn't some one sent for the police?"

"No, no!" cried Colonel Wharton excitedly. "I don't want the police."

"But, Wharton, that's the only way you can possibly recover your diamond."

"I don't want the police! I don't want the police!" he repeated irritably.

"Why?"

"That's my business," was the quick retort.

"Gentlemen," said Jacquette with the air of one who seeks to pour oil upon the troubled waters. "I think I can understand the Colonel's aversion to the notoriety that would come to him if this matter were given to the police. The newspapers would be full of it. We would have descriptions of the diamond, pictures of Hedgewater House, and interviews galore. Imagine the effect of all that upon a man of Colonel Wharton's sensibilities —"

"What of that?" interrupted the Doctor, with

an amused smile, "if it helped to bring back the diamond?"

"I don't want it, I tell you," shrieked the Colonel in hysterical tones, "I don't want it!"

"Oh, very well," was the crestfallen response. "You happen to be the doctor in this case and whatever you say goes."

Jules Jacquette now stepped forward and calmly took possession of the situation. He rubbed his big hand across his bristly hair, saying:

"Gentlemen, it must be evident to you that this is what the police call an inside job. There are no indications to prove that any one has broken into the house. Hence suspicion must fall on all who are here. It is a painful suggestion to make, but I must in justice to myself at least — insist that all of the rooms be ransacked and that each one of us submit to a personal search."

"Oh, not that!" sobbed Dora Wharton. "Not that!"

"Dora is right," said the Colonel feebly. "I do not wish that indignity to be placed upon my guests."

"But your guests insist upon it."

Before any one realized fully what was being done the Brazilian had thrown up his big hands and was ordering Doctor Henderson to search him. The

physician complied in a shame-faced way — and found nothing. Victor Jayne was the second to volunteer and in his case, as in that of the South American, there were no results. The next moment I found Jacquette going through my pockets, patting my coat and trousers on the side with the air of a professional detective and otherwise making himself obnoxious. My cheeks burned with shame, but I could not resist without placing myself in a false position. But then and there I resolved that if the opportunity ever presented itself I would make the smooth-faced rascal pay for the indignity he had placed on me.

After that the servants, one at a time, were compelled to go through the ordeal, and were cross-examined into the bargain. Finally the trunks, the bureaus and all of the articles in all the rooms were carefully searched in the hope of locating the missing diamond.

It was not found!

An hour later Doctor Henderson left the house fussing and fuming and denouncing Colonel Wharton for his obstinacy in not sending for the police.

"A good detective," he declared vehemently, "might clear the business up in twenty-four hours."

His remark gave me much food for thought. Why should I not clear it up? I was there for

that purpose and I knew more about the business than any one in the house. Worst of all, I could not rid myself of the impression that Dora Wharton had it in her power to solve the problem. I did not want to feel that she was under a cloud. I would not permit myself to think of her as a culprit. I preferred to feel that she could give an explanation of her conduct that would be satisfactory to all concerned. Yet if that was the case why did she permit her uncle to suffer as he was undoubtedly suffering?

I had no heart for the work of arranging the coins in the museum and Colonel Wharton was too much distracted and dazed to give the business any attention. The Red Diamond filled my mind to the exclusion of everything else.

Finally, I resolved to go to Dora and put two questions to her which would end the suspense. I had immense faith in her truthfulness and felt that her replies would clarify the situation. It was nearly an hour later that I found her sitting at the piano in the living-room. She seemed to be bending over a sheet of music, but when I came near I was pained to see that tears were trickling down her cheeks. I was embarrassed at this evidence of distress and might have withdrawn if she had not straightened up and greeted me in a low voice.

"I — I am sorry to have intruded on you at this time," I began lamely.

She made a pathetic attempt to smile and dabbed her eyes with a little lace handkerchief.

"Oh, it's all right," she said bravely, "but I'm sorry you see us in such an unsettled condition. I'm — I'm afraid you're not finding it very cheerful at Hedgewater House."

"I'm not thinking of that," I declared resolutely, "but wondering if I cannot be of some service to you."

"You're awfully kind, but there is nothing you can do — nothing."

There was an awkward pause, but I had gone too far to withdraw.

"Miss Wharton," I said slowly, and speaking each word painfully, "I think I may be able to help you if you will answer two questions."

She looked at me in a startled way and rubbed her hand across her tear-stained face.

"I — I don't think I quite understand you. You say you want to question me?"

"Yes, may I?"

She looked positively scared now and glanced around as if to find a means of escape. Then she said as a child might say when it has been driven into a corner:

"What is it you wish to know?"

I cleared my throat with an effort and spoke as calmly as possible.

"Have you got the Red Diamond?"

A flash of terror crossed her face and showed itself in her troubled eyes.

"No," she cried with sudden energy, "I have not got it."

"Do you know where it is?"

There was a pause for a moment and then she replied in wailing tones:

"I haven't the faintest idea where it is."

There was another pause, and before I could think of what to say she had arisen from the piano stool.

"I think," she said with sudden energy, "that you are impertinent and I resent your questions."

The next moment she fled from the room. I looked after her with a mixture of sorrow and suspicion.

I was sadly disappointed in Dora!

CHAPTER X

THE THIRTEENTH TRUNK

TEN minutes after that interview with Dora I received a message from Bromley Barnes saying that he was at the Hedgewater Inn, where he wanted to see me as soon as possible. He added that Hapgood, one of his best men, would be at the entrance to Hedgewater House to take any orders I desired to give him, and to watch the house and its inmates in my absence.

Responding to the call at once I met Hapgood at the gate. He was a tall, thin fellow, dressed in rusty black and with the lugubrious face of an undertaker. He received my orders without the slightest emotion and said that if any one left the house he would make it his business to shadow that person even if it were necessary to go to San Francisco and return. When I asked him what he was going to do if more than one person left the house he said that he would rely on his assistants, who were within call.

On the way to Hedgewater Inn I tried to think of how I was going to explain the disappearance of the Red Diamond to Bromley Barnes. I had seen it and the fact that I permitted it to slip away from me was not very creditable either to my shrewdness or ability. Yet I had literally followed the instructions given me by Barnes. Suppose I had taken it from Colonel Wharton when he first drew it from the safe? What would have happened? Could I have escaped from the house alive? And if I had tried to take the diamond and failed would not the Government have been in a worse position than it was at present?

Thus I whiled away the time as I plodded toward Hedgewater Inn. At one time I had made up my mind not to mention the incident wherein Dora had seemed to take the diamond from the safe. But mature reflection convinced me that without that episode the story I was about to tell the veteran investigator would be worse than useless. Also I felt sure that its suppression so far as Barnes was concerned would be a great injustice to the Government. She might be helped by the matter being held in confidence for the present, and I would ask Barnes to so hold the story.

But, alas, for human frailty, for when I reached the door of the Inn all of my reasoning went to the

four winds. I loved the girl and I could not accuse her of a crime. I felt that I must postpone that revelation until the very last moment. I would be faithful to the Government but I would not unnecessarily expose Dora Wharton to shame. The vital thing was to get the diamond, and I vowed that I would not rest until I had recovered it.

Barnes greeted me in one of the private rooms of the Inn and I told him of the incidents of the night before — all except the episode of the girl at the safe — and of how the diamond was missing in the morning. He listened attentively from start to finish but exhibited no surprise.

"My investigations satisfied me that the Red Diamond was at Hedgewater House," he said.

"But its disappearance?" I ventured.

"That is not surprising — but we'll get it soon."

I breathed a sigh of relief, and as I did so he said:

"Now you've told me your experiences; I've got a bit of news for you."

My heart palpitated. I wondered if he knew anything about Dora.

"We've got one of the conspirators behind lock and key."

"Who — who is it?" I stammered.

The veteran investigator pulled a corncob pipe

from his pocket, filled it with tobacco, lit it, and, after taking two or three puffs, said contentedly:

"Well, it's a long story and if you'll be patient I'll try and tell you."

I was on edge with excitement but this calm person disregarded my agitation. He did not look like a detective and he did not act like one. Seen for the first time he would be pointed out as a prosperous business man or a banker or broker. In his hours of leisure he hunted for first editions of American humorists and his great ambition was to complete that collection. On duty he was as shrewd as a fox and as persevering as a bill collector. At present I knew that he was gathering up the scattered ends of the Red Diamond case, and the provoking slowness of telling his tale was his method of relaxing from the strain of the chase.

"You know, Hugh," he said after a few more enjoyable puffs on the corncob pipe, "the solution of the manner in which that diamond was smuggled into this port has caused me to lose two nights' sleep, but I take my hat off to the smuggler — name still unknown — because he has proven that there is something new under the Customs sun."

"He was original, then?" I queried.

"You bet. His plan was not only new to me, but it was simplicity itself. I thought I knew every

imaginable way in which a diamond could be smuggled, and when I say a diamond I mean a diamond in a setting, one that is bulky enough to make it apparent to any well-trained inspector. I've known clever smugglers to cut a hole out of the inside of the pages of a book and bring precious stones in that way; I've known 'em to bake them in the middle of a cake; I've known 'em to put 'em in a woman's back hair and in the hollow heel of a boot, but this fellow — whoever he is — has gone them all one better by doing the obvious thing; and the obvious thing, as you well know, is the thing we usually overlook."

"Yes," I concurred patiently.

"Well, I got the passenger list of the *Dom Pedro* after we'd sent you up here and I went over the list of names until I knew them by heart. I sent for the inspectors who examined the trunks and I cross-questioned them about their work. I adopted the system of elimination. One by one they were all set aside until they were all accounted for —"

"All?" I interrupted.

"All," he continued gravely, "except the Spanish Ambassador."

"But, surely," I exclaimed, "you don't suspect the Spanish Ambassador —"

He raised his hand in protest.

"Not so quick. I can relieve you by saying that we do not suspect the distinguished gentleman who represents the Spanish Government. There will be no international complications."

I laughed.

"I suppose not, but in any event the customs officials here were helpless in the matter. When the Secretary of the Treasury sent word to the Collector to extend the courtesies of the port to the Spanish Ambassador and the members of his staff that meant that his trunks were to be passed without examination."

"Precisely, and they were passed without examination."

I was puzzled.

"Was the diamond in one of the Ambassador's trunks?"

"It was not."

A new thought came to my mind.

"Perhaps the fact that he came to this country by way of Brazil —"

"No," interrupted Barnes. "There was no significance in that, although it did make it possible for the rascals to carry out their scheme."

I was becoming impatient at the provoking slowness of the old man. I threw my hands up impulsively.

"Well, I'm not going to guess any more," I cried. "My dear friend, will you kindly tell me just what they did?"

He smiled in his benevolent, fatherly way.

"I'm trying to do that," he said, "if you'll only stop interrupting me."

I promised to keep as quiet as a church mouse.

"My mind kept going back to the Ambassador's baggage," resumed Barnes, "and I finally went to the surveyor and got transcripts of the returns from the *Dom Pedro*. The slips show that there were twelve trunks. I got the inspector who had assisted me that day and he remembered that they were red leather trunks with brass trimmings and each one of them had the coat-of-arms of Spain on the side.

"After that I looked up the dock superintendent and asked him if he remembered the royal trunks. He said he did, that he had given them particular attention because of the royal coat-of-arms. My talk with him brought out a surprising bit of information. He said that he stood there while the thirteen trunks were loaded on an express wagon."

"Where did the thirteenth trunk come from?"

"You see, my young friend, I had stumbled on a most important clew. The official returns showed that the Spanish Ambassador and his official staff

had twelve trunks while this man was willing to swear that thirteen trunks left the wharf. Do you begin to see?"

"If you will permit me to change the metaphor," I grinned, "I begin to smell a rat."

"Well, rat or smuggler, it was all the same to me," commented Barnes. "I had a most promising clew and I ran it out."

"With what result?"

"My first business was to find the driver of the wagon who delivered the trunks. That was not as easy as it seemed. Usually most of the baggage from the wharf is taken away by the bonded drayman who has a contract with the Government. But in this instance it was a private expressman who happened to be on hand when the *Dom Pedro* arrived. I located him after a twelve-hour search and he admitted that he had hauled the trunks."

"But, one minute," I broke in. "You say that these trunks all had the coat-of-arms on their sides. If that is true how could an ordinary plebeian trunk get into their company without being noticed?"

"I'm glad you spoke of that," commented the veteran investigator, "because it has a most important bearing on the case. The thirteenth trunk was identical with the other twelve in size and appearance, even down to the detail of the coat-of-

arms. That shows the immense cleverness of the rogues. They found that the Ambassador was sailing from Rio Janeiro to this port and they discovered the character of his baggage. It was then that the thirteenth trunk was made for this special purpose."

"Do you suppose that it was placed with the Ambassador's baggage when he sailed?"

"Not at all; that would have given the scheme away. It was kept hidden until the *Dom Pedro* docked at this side."

"Even then," I suggested, "it could not have been done except with the connivance of some one on the boat."

"Boy," said Bromley Barnes, beaming on me, "you're positively brilliant this morning. It may please you to know that your supposition hits the nail precisely on the head."

I nodded.

"You were saying," I prompted, "that you found the expressman who carted the trunks from the wharf."

"Yes, and he said that when he was about a half block from the wharf one of the officers of the *Dom Pedro* came running after him and told him that he was to leave the thirteenth trunk at a house on Clark Street. He obeyed the order, of course,

"I *JUMPED TO MY* FEET IN MY EXCITEMENT"

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and left the trunk at the address indicated. That trunk contained the Red Diamond!"

There was an impressive silence, after which I asked Barnes if he had gone to the Clark Street house.

"I did," he answered, "and found that my bird had flown. It is an ordinary rooming-house, and the bit of baggage was delivered to a Mr. Marshall who had rented the room the week before and who left immediately after the trunk was delivered. It goes without saying that the name was an assumed one. I tried to get a description of the strange lodger and the best I could learn was that he was a smooth-faced man and wore a light gray suit."

I jumped to my feet in my excitement.

"A man answering that description," I cried, "has been lurking about Hedgewater House ever since I came here."

"Quite likely," agreed the old man, "but let me finish my story. The next thing I did was to take the expressman down to the *Dom Pedro*. I explained the business to the captain and asked him to line up all of the ship's company. He did so, and my expressman promptly walked over to John Johnson, the steward of the ship, and said that he was the man who told him to deliver the trunk to the Clark Street address. Johnson couldn't deny the

soft impeachment, but he tried to explain it away by saying that he was acting under instructions from some member of the Spanish Embassy. I wanted to know which member it was and he couldn't tell me. His story was so palpably false that I took him into custody and he is now in prison, awaiting a hearing before the United States Commissioner."

"But what is the charge against him — that is what legal charge can you make?"

"I dunno," was the cheerful response. "I've just taken a chance in the hope of digging up something definite before he is given a formal hearing. I'm satisfied that he is a crook, but I've got to prove it."

"This is interesting," I commented.

"You bet it is. Now I've got to leave you. I wanted to get your story at first hand and I've told you mine, because it may help you in your future operations. I'm going back to town to round up the dealers in diamonds and precious stones. And, in the meantime, I'll keep you posted of anything which occurs."

"But this Johnson; haven't you tried to get him to confess?"

"Tried!" cried the old man with a snort of disgust. "If there is anything we haven't tried it is

because it is unknown to the police of this or any other country. We've given him the third degree in about thirty-three different forms and all he does is to look at us and say nothing. He won't talk, and that's all there is about it."

"But you're going to hold him as long as the law allows?"

"Longer — something may turn up at any moment to loosen his tongue."

"You — you want me to stay at Hedgewater House?" I ventured.

"Want you!" he cried. "Why, man alive, you've got to stay there!"

By this time he was on his feet and preparing to leave the Inn. We separated at the door. He went in the direction of the station while I headed for Hedgewater House. He waved his hand at me and gave me a parting shot.

"Hugh!" he cried.

"Well," I answered.

"If you don't bring the bacon you needn't come home," were his final words.

I thought that over as I trudged toward the house of mystery. I was truly in a dilemma. If I failed to recover the diamond my prestige at the Custom House would be lost. If I did it might involve Dora Wharton in serious trouble.

How would it all end?

My mind reverted to the silent steward in the station house. He was the Sphinx whose lips I was expected to unlock. Could I do it? How was it to be done?

One thing was clear. If there was a conspiracy in the smuggling of the Red Diamond, this man Johnson was the first, if not the most important, link in the chain.

CHAPTER XI

VICTOR JAYNE SPEAKS

WHEN I returned, Hedgewater House lay basking in the splendor of the morning's sun. The atmosphere of mystery which had surrounded it seemed to have been dispelled with the mists of the night. The casual traveler passing that way would surely have envied the occupants of such a beautiful home. It presented all of the outward appearance of happiness and prosperity. But what a difference within! Doubt, misunderstanding, fear and suspense gripped the hearts of more than one of the inmates.

What a satire it presented upon the futility of mere riches! The poor man with contentment in his heart was far wealthier than any of those who lodged beneath the stately coverings of Hedgewater House. The devil of uncertainty hung over them all. Consider the horror of waiting for each succeeding hour and each succeeding day with the fear that it will bring with it the sword of disaster!

When I reached the gate Harry Hapgood was

sitting in the sun, sucking a straw with true rural contentment. He arose, saluted me in military fashion, and reported that a stranger had called during my absence. This person had asked to see Victor Jayne and being denied that privilege had departed in great indignation. He was an undersized person, decently but not fashionably dressed in a gray suit."

"Did you follow him?" I asked.

Mr. Hapgood shook his head mournfully.

"I did not — my job was to stay here until you returned."

"Yes, yes," I cried, "but it was necessary that he should be shadowed."

Mr. Hapgood looked at me reproachfully.

"My dear sir," he said, "I know my business. He was followed."

"By —"

"Yes, sir, by one of the most trusted men in the Department. It was my business to stay here until you returned. You have returned — hence I depart."

He walked away with all of the solemnity of a pall bearer and left me to my meditations. They were not pleasant. I felt about as cheerful as a man sitting on the lid of a volcano. It was time for me to be about my business, or, rather, the busi-

ness of Colonel Wharton, arranging his collection. Before going into the museum I glanced into the living-room. Mrs. Crilly, who was sitting there in solitary state, saw me and called to me. There was a curious look on the face of the little lady that puzzled me and set me guessing. She pointed an aristocratic finger at a chair opposite her.

"Sit down," she commanded.

I did so. It would have been almost impossible to disregard that imperative manner. Aunt Sarah was usually the most composed of women, but at this moment she appeared flustered. The freshness about her face seemed more pronounced than ever and her shrewd, kindly eyes were sparkling. She pressed the folds of her dress and said, as though she were talking to herself:

"You seem almost like one of the family."

I bowed.

"I'm fairly bursting to take some one into my confidence," she went on with vivacity, "and you must be the victim."

"Complimented, I'm sure," I said.

"Well, it's happened at last!" she exclaimed, shaking her head with decision.

"What?" I asked blankly.

"Victor's proposed to Dora!"

I drew back as though I had been smacked in the

face. And as the significance of the words dawned upon me my heart became like lead. Aunt Sarah, with her snow-white hair parted in the middle and her benevolent face, did not suggest lack of feeling, but she had dealt me a cruel blow.

"Yes," she went on, "he has asked her to be his wife, and — and she has not declined."

"You mean she has accepted?" I asked, bitterly.

"No, she has not. She has asked for time and he has reluctantly consented. Colonel Wharton favors the match and as it is most desirable in every way I suppose that Dora will eventually give her consent. Victor Jayne is a fine young man and he will make a good husband."

"Why do you tell me all of this?" I asked with rising irritation.

"Because I like you."

I laughed joylessly.

"So, liking me, you torture me?"

Her fine old eyes blinked at this, but reaching over she took me by the hand.

"My boy, I am advancing in years but I am not blind. I notice that you are growing fonder of Dora every day you are here. Now you have one of two things to do. You must crush this passion or you must leave this house. Dora is not for you. She is intended for Victor Jayne. It is her uncle's

wish and it is my wish. I don't blame you for loving Dora. I love her myself. But it is hopeless so far as you are concerned, and I feel that I am doing you a real kindness by telling you the truth at once. Dora won't do it and my brother is too blind and too much taken up with other worries to see what is going on beneath his nose. Hence the ungrateful task falls on me."

"Has Dora asked you to say this?"

"No," admitted Aunt Sarah, "she has no intimation of what I was going to say to you."

"So," I cried bitterly, "you are going to compel her to marry this man whether she wishes it or not."

The old lady's smile disappeared.

"There's no compulsion — please do not forget yourself."

"But what do you know about Jayne — how do you know that he is all that he claims to be?"

She arose with a haughty gesture and left the room. At the door she paused for a final shot.

"We know as much of him as we do of you!"

I realized in a moment that I had given offense. I had offended a friend and turned her into a possible enemy. But I was so upset by the news that she had given me that I did not fully realize what I was doing or saying. It was precisely the thing

that I should have expected and yet when the blow fell it found me utterly unprepared. The hints that had been thrown out should have been sufficient. And my eyes and ears should have taught me something. But they didn't. It was the old, old story over again.

I threw myself into the folds of a high back chair and buried my head in my hands. What should I do? What could I do? I felt perfectly satisfied that she would never be happy with a man like Victor Jayne. And this feeling on my part was not entirely selfish, because I had an ingrained prejudice against the fellow and a suspicion that there was something wrong about him. While I was sitting there I heard some one come in the room and I realized that Dora Wharton and Victor Jayne were within a few feet of me. My impulse was to jump up and leave the room, but I hesitated — and in that moment of hesitation was lost. They were talking in subdued tones and after the first few words were spoken I was helpless to leave the room. God knows I did not intend to be an eavesdropper, but I could not help myself.

"Dora," he was saying softly, "you have it in your power to make me happy by saying 'yes.'"

She was silent.

"Why postpone the matter any longer," he per-

sisted. "If you consent now it will not only be a joy to me but it will be a great pleasure to your uncle."

When she replied it seemed to me that there was just a trace of weariness in her tone.

"I thought," she said, "that we had gone all over that this morning, Victor."

The sound of his Christian name coming from her lips sent a pang of regret through my heart. It seemed, in a way, to give countenance to a suit, which I felt was impertinent.

"I know," he begged, "but you leave me in suspense and I can't bear it. I adore you. I don't ask you to feel that way toward me. I'm sure you care for me, and that is all I ask. Once we are married I will devote myself heart and soul to winning your affection."

I admitted to myself, grudgingly enough, that he was an ardent wooer. I had not thought it was in him.

"Please, Victor," she was saying, "do not press me any more at present."

They walked away and I remained in my place until the subdued sound of their voices passed away in the distance. Imagine my feelings at being the involuntary hearer of those confidences! It is true that Jayne did not appear to make much progress

with his suit, but I was fearful of the consequences. She was in a dangerous frame of mind. Sorely beset on all sides and her mind perplexed, she was in the mood for anything. His persistence, which under ordinary circumstances would have gone for naught, might yet win the day. Besides, the tone of implied respect in her voice almost goaded me to desperation.

I do not know how I got through the day. On the one hand was the mystery of the Red Diamond, which might eventually wreck the family, and on the other was my love for Dora, which had already distracted me beyond endurance. The two things were so intertwined that it seemed each must rise or fall with the other.

Twice during the day Doctor Henderson came over to urge Colonel Wharton to put the diamond mystery in the hands of "a good detective," as he phrased it, and each time he irritated the Colonel in the most unaccountable manner. Jules Jacquette and Victor Jayne were quite as much agitated over the disappearance of the diamond as any one in the house. At one time I found Colonel Wharton and the Brazilian together in the living-room and on that occasion Jacquette was talking to him in a tone that a guest rarely assumes toward his host.

For my part I was eager for action and yet

pinned down by the necessities of the case. Like Bromley Barnes, I felt that something would occur to start me on the solution of the mystery. My mind constantly recurred to that night when Dora crept along the side of the living-room with a candle in her hand and terror in her eyes. Perhaps any one else in my place would have arrested her on sight. I don't know. All that I do know is that I shut my eyes to evidence that was as clear as the noonday sun and persisted in believing that she was a victim of cruel circumstances.

On the night of the day when Jayne made his formal proposal of marriage to Dora I had the sweet pleasure of being in her company for nearly an hour. It was a blissful hour to me, especially as I had a premonition that it would be the last opportunity I should have of enjoying her society for a long time.

We were in the living-room, as was customary after dinner. Jules Jacquette asked Colonel Wharton and Victor Jayne if they would join him in his room. This left me alone with Aunt Sarah and Dora. The poor girl looked distressed as she had looked for the preceding twenty-four hours, but the extreme terror had left her and she seemed more composed. We had lamp light, as usual, and at my request she went to the piano and played one

of those rhapsodies of which I am fond and which to me represent the tumult that goes on in the human soul more accurately than any composition of which I am aware.

I had not the faintest idea what purpose Jacquette had in taking Colonel Wharton to his room. but their absence chimed in with my feelings. Aunt Sarah was with us, but presently the dear old soul began to nod and in a little while was sleeping with a satisfaction that was attested by alternate grunts and snores.

Dora was at her best and played with unrestrained power. The thunder of the tempest as it roared across the ocean main could be heard; then the lull followed by the whistling of the wind, sudden outbursts, deafening windstorms and finally quiet — the quiet that brings peace, tranquillity and happiness in its wake. It was wonderful, this playing in the lamp-lit room with me standing there gazing into the liquid depths of Dora Wharton's black eyes. The quizzical look was absent from those eyes and the smile no longer hovered about her lips, but there was a something in her eager glances that filled my soul with hope. I forgot all about the Red Diamond. I thought only of her and the privilege of standing by her side.

She reached over for some music and in doing

so touched my hand. The contact was like an electric current and set my nerves tingling. I could have sworn that the color came to her cheeks and that her eyes took on a softer look. She paused for a moment and her head sank on her breast, and when I looked down I saw unbidden tears in her eyes.

"Dora!" I exclaimed involuntarily, "what is the matter?"

She brushed the tears away hastily and smiled wanly.

"It's nothing," she declared hastily. "I'm tired and overwrought."

She rose from the piano stool as she spoke and stood there with one hand on the instrument. Unconsciously I placed my arm about her, protectingly. It was the last straw. Her head sank on my shoulder and she sobbed:

"Hugh! Hugh!"

My brain was in a tumult, my heart beat furiously and I feverishly caressed her silken hair. There was a rustling sound from the rear and Aunt Sarah awoke.

"Bless my soul!" she cried, peering through the semi-gloom, "I believe I've been asleep."

Dora hurried over and planted an impulsive kiss on her forehead.

"You have," she cried tremulously, "and I think we should retire."

They left the room together and at the doorway Dora called out in a tone of infinite tenderness:

"Good night!"

I breathed a sigh of contentment. I knew now that my love for Dora was reciprocated. It was, indeed, a good night for me.

CHAPTER XII

A SURPRISE FROM BRAZIL

THE librettist sings that when love is young all the world seems gay. When I arose next morning I felt as though I was walking on air. Evidently I had never before experienced the real joy of life. The grounds about Hedgewater House never appeared so alluring as they did that morning. I strolled in the direction of the summer house and standing on that elevation had a fine view of the Harmony River sparkling in the morning sunlight.

It was delightful to sit there and think of Dora and bliss. Presently a cloud passed across the sky and temporarily obscured the brightness of the sun. It was a reminder that my joy might be short-lived. It recalled me to a sense of my duty. It brought forth a query sharp and insistent:

Why was I at Hedgewater House?

The answer put a damper on my happiness. To win the affection and the love of Dora Wharton was one thing; to hold it amid these perplexing circumstances, quite another. Suppose she were un-

able to give a satisfactory explanation of her strange conduct! What then? I thrust the question from my mind. It would be sufficient to meet that emergency when it arose. I strolled in the direction of the house. No one was about and I was wondering how I would amuse myself until breakfast time when I noticed the morning paper lying on the porch where it had been thrown by the carrier. I picked it up in a casual way and began to scan the headlines carelessly. The first item of news that caught my eyes caused me to jump with surprise and amazement. They said "Star of the South Stolen." It was a special cablegram from Rio Janeiro and it told of how thieves had entered the National Museum in that city and stolen what was regarded as the most valuable diamond in the world. The robbery had occurred on the second of October, and I remembered quite distinctly that the *Dom Pedro* had left Rio on the morning of October the third, so it was quite probable that the stolen diamond was the one that had been brought over on that ship and hidden in the thirteenth trunk which had been so cleverly added to the baggage of the Spanish Ambassador.

The story from the capital of Brazil was a column in length and it gave all of the details of the robbery so far as they were known. It told of the

care that had been taken to protect the Red Diamond, how it had been kept in a glass case in a special alcove and how a watchman was kept on guard at the museum day and night, summer and winter. It seemed that on the night in question the watchman had been chloroformed and while he was unconscious the thieves had secured the keys of the alcove and had opened the glass case which held the treasure and escaped with the famous diamond, leaving a cheap substitute in its place.

That was more than three weeks before. Why was the news so late? The answer was simple enough. It had been suppressed. The Director of the Museum was distracted when he arrived the morning after the robbery and discovered the substitute. He knew he would be severely condemned not only by the managers of the museum but by the people of Brazil, who looked upon the Star of the South as one of the most treasured possessions of the nation. Had it not been dug out of the mines of Brazil? And when it was cut into two perfect diamonds had not one of the specimens been placed in the museum to be the heritage of the people forever? He felt only too truly that the loss of the stone would be regarded as a national scandal.

Hence every effort was made to recover the dia-

mond without permitting the fact of its loss to become public. The secret police were put on the case and every nook and corner of the republic was ransacked in the endeavor to recover the stone. Every pawn shop had been visited and every suspicious character put upon the rack. But all in vain. It was not to be found anywhere. The reports of the police were carefully scanned by the government officials and after much deliberation they came to the conclusion that the Star of the South had been carried to the United States of America. Then, and then only, the story of the disappearance of the diamond was made known to the world.

The narrative, crisply told, and with every paragraph teeming with human interest, left me gasping for breath. This amazing revelation had to do directly with the adventure in which I was embarked. We were not mistaken at the outset. The Red Diamond had come to America on the *Dom Pedro*. But instead of being that portion of the original stone which belonged to an individual in Brazil *it was the diamond which belonged to the Brazilian Government*.

This added enormously to the importance of the case. That which concerned an individual had, after all, a limited interest. That which concerned

a government might easily lead to international complications.

I thought of this new phase of the case as it affected Colonel Wharton and the members of his household, and as I did so the force and the importance of the story in the *Morning Chronicle* burst upon my dazed intelligence.

If this story were true, and I did not doubt it in the least, it meant that the Red Diamond had been stolen as well as smuggled. *It placed Colonel Basil Wharton in the position of being a thief and a smuggler!*

As the full force of this became evident to me I sat down in an endeavor to recover my self-possession. I was not the only person who knew that the Red Diamond had been in the safe of Colonel Wharton and each of these persons would be aware that the Colonel was amenable to the criminal laws of both Brazil and the United States of America. What a position for a reputable citizen who had served his country in its hour of need!

It seemed to me that the time had arrived for a plain face-to-face talk with Colonel Wharton. And yet it would not do to take any drastic measures until I had the opportunity of communicating with Bromley Barnes, or of hearing from him. I got up from my seat and took a turn about the garden

in an endeavor to get my thinking faculties in order. It was quite clear that what had been an ordinary smuggling case had now become an international theft which might end by involving the American Government. While these thoughts were running through my mind Colonel Wharton came out of the museum and walked in the direction of his house.

My impulse was to call to him, but I refrained because I was not quite clear as to my future course of conduct. I looked on the man with a mixture of pity and curiosity. He seemed to have aged in the few days that I had been at Hedgewater House, and when I recalled the series of incidents which had occurred in that time I was not surprised. He appeared thinner, and the slight stoop was more pronounced than ever. His look was careworn and he was deep in thought.

As he reached the porch he picked up the copy of the *Morning Chronicle* which I had left there. He appeared to be skimming over the headlines with the air of a man who is not deeply interested in the news. I wondered if he would see the article concerning the Red Diamond. The wonder should have been if it were possible for him to miss it. The thing stuck out on the first page with the persistence and the prominence of a sore thumb. How

would he take it? I did not have long to wait. The newspaper slipped from his nerveless fingers and fluttered to the floor. He clasped his hands to his forehead and groaned:

"God help me!"

The next moment, and before I could reach him, he crumpled up and sank to the floor like a heap of old clothes. When I gained his side his eyes were closed and he was gasping for breath. I called lustily for help, and in the meantime chafed his hands vigorously. But it was evident that he was unconscious and needed medical attention.

In a few moments the porch was filled. Dora Wharton was the first to reach the scene and she fell upon her knees by the side of the stricken man.

"Uncle," she cried imploringly, "don't you know me? Please speak! This is Dora, your own Dora!"

There was no response from those white lips and the girl burst into tears. I longed to take her in my arms and comfort her. Never had she seemed so desolate. It was as if all she had in the world was lost. She patted the unconscious man on the hands, she smoothed his forehead and she begged him to say but a single word.

It was heartrending, and in the midst of it I gently touched her on the shoulder.

"It's serious," I said softly, "but I do not think it's fatal. It seems like a stroke. But he needs you more than any one else. Please compose yourself for his sake."

She glanced up and gave me a look of gratitude from her tear-filled eyes. Then, with remarkable fortitude, she pushed her grief aside and prepared to render any assistance that was possible.

"Thank you," she said with a catch in her voice. "Tell me what I can do."

"Send for Doctor Henderson at once. In the meantime have some one help me to take him to his room."

Jules Jacquette, Aunt Sarah, Victor Jayne and Amy Smith, the maid, had arrived by this time and they were all leaning over, filled with excitement and wondering what could be done. The maid looked terrified, but she had more presence of mind than the others. She stooped over, loosened the collar of the stricken one and pressed a small bottle of smelling salts to his nostrils. Jacquette proved himself equal to the emergency, too. He grasped the Colonel by the shoulders and said to me quietly:

"Now, if you take his feet I think we may be able to get him to his room."

We did so in a few minutes. The master of

Hedgewater House presented a pitiable sight as we laid him on a couch in his handsomely furnished bedroom. His aristocratic face was very pale, his eyes were closed and he was still unconscious. Aunt Sarah and Dora followed us into the room and busied themselves in doing the numerous little things which come so quickly and so naturally to the intuition of capable women. The old lady controlled her grief but it was evident that she was suffering under a great strain. Dora never for a moment took her eyes off the man on the couch and moved about like a person in a trance. In the midst of this came Doctor Henderson. His trained eye seemed to take in everything at a glance.

"Now," he exclaimed briskly, "I'd like everybody to leave the room except the two ladies. If I need any of the others I'll call on them."

We filed out of the room slowly and sorrowfully. Jules Jacquette looked at me curiously and I knew that he was thirsting to hear the details of this unexpected attack. I did not say a word until we got outside. He looked at me intently.

"Do you think it is — serious?"

I shook my head.

"I'm not a medical man — you'll have to ask Doctor Henderson."

If looks could have killed I would have been

struck dead on the spot. It was the first open evidence of hostility that he had shown toward me. He cocked his big head on one side, and there was just the faintest curl of his thick lip as he said:

"Pardon me, señor, but you seem to know so much that I thought your knowledge might extend to medicine."

I regretted my hasty reply. I was not yet ready to make an enemy of Jules Jacquette. I tried to speak in a conciliatory tone.

"No, I only claim to be a specialist on one or two things."

"On Red Diamonds, for instance," he suggested, with an ugly leer.

"Yes," I cried, accepting the challenge at once, "on Red Diamonds especially."

He laughed in pretended glee and rubbed his big hand across his closely-cropped head.

"I notice that the young señor is quick at what you Americans call the retort courteous."

I said nothing in reply. By this time we were out on the porch. He turned to me now with his winning manner — and he had a winning manner — and asked sympathetically:

"May I ask the cause of Colonel Wharton's sudden seizure?"

I hesitated and looked squarely into his compelling gray eyes.

"Yes," I said presently, "it all came from looking at the headlines of a newspaper."

He laughed — not so pleasantly.

"My young friend makes a jest of a grave subject."

"Not at all," I replied, and reaching over I picked up the *Chronicle* and handed it to him. "Here you may see for yourself."

As he straightened out the newspaper I watched him narrowly. I was extremely anxious to see what effect the startling news from Rio Janeiro would have upon this man and I posted myself in a position where I could see his face distinctly. He took hold of the paper in his two big, greedy hands and knitted his eyebrows as if trying to grasp the words that stared him in the face.

The effect was startling in the extreme. His hands shook as if he had the palsy, a wild look came into his eyes and a grayish pallor slowly spread over his countenance. Gradually these signs passed away and he carefully read the article to the end. He folded the paper slowly and turned to me:

"This — this news," he said, moistening his lips with the end of his tongue, "is astonishing. I — I wonder if it can be true?"

"It has all the earmarks of truth," I commented drily.

"But," he said eagerly, as if to argue the point, "Colonel Wharton's diamond was supposed to be the half of the Star of the South that belonged to a private collection."

"How do you know?" I asked sharply.

"Why — why," he stammered, "Colonel Wharton told us, didn't he?"

"I don't remember."

"Why, surely," he protested, "that is the only way in which I could have obtained the information."

At that point Victor Jayne came out of the house. For some reason or other he had shown more animation during the last twenty-four hours. His languid manner seemed to have slipped from him like a garment and now he was brisk and animated.

"What caused the trouble with Colonel Wharton?" he asked, addressing Jacquette.

The Brazilian evidently had no wish to pursue the subject.

"It was a stroke, probably," he said.

"Show him the paper," I suggested.

The Brazilian looked as if he would like to hide the newspaper from Jayne, but the young man caught sight of it and reached over and took it

ithout any ceremony. The effect of the headlines ɔon him were more pronounced, if anything, than ıey had been upon Jules Jacquette. His face ırned the color of chalk and his eyes protruded ·om their sockets.

The agitation of these two men seemed signifiınt to me. It is true that they had seen the Red ıiamond on the night it was exhibited by Colonel Vharton and they could realize the predicament in hich the cablegram placed him, but why should ıey display such terror? Yet a few minutes later hen Dora and Aunt Sarah read the paper they ıreatened to go into hysterics. And finally Amy mith, the maid, when she heard of the matter, ɔbbed as if her heart would break.

I am not superstitious, but the malign influence f that stone began to get on my nerves. It seemed ɔ have a disquieting and demoralizing effect upon ɾery one that came into contact with it. While l of this was going on I was mentally planning my ɔurse of action. I resolved that I should first conılt with Doctor Henderson and then, with his perıission, ask Colonel Wharton point blank where ɛ had obtained the diamond. Upon his answer ould depend his own safety and the happiness of ıora and myself.

But it was not long before I discovered that Jules

Jacquette was making an effort to see the sick man. Twice he slipped up the stairway and tapped on the bedroom door and twice he was angrily told by the Doctor to go away and not bother him. I resolved, then and there, to be the first man in the house to see the Colonel, aside from Doctor Henderson. Accordingly, I posted myself in a position in the upper hallway where I could see the physician when he left the sickroom. Presently the doorway opened slightly and I hurried over and caught the Doctor.

"I want to see Colonel Wharton," I whispered.

He frowned.

"What the devil's the matter with you people?" he cried with some heat. "You all act as if you had lost your senses."

"Who — for instance?"

"Well, first Jacquette, then Jayne, and now you. All clamoring to see a man who's really too sick to see any one."

"But I have a grave reason," I persisted.

He closed the door of the sickroom and came out into the hallway.

"You look as if there was something on your mind," he admitted. "What is it?"

In a few short, hurried sentences I repeated the story in the *Chronicle*, and told him that Colonel

Wharton's whole future depended upon his telling where he got the diamond.

"I see your point," he said slowly, "but I'm afraid he's in no condition to help you or himself at present."

"Couldn't I try him?" I persisted.

He gave an impatient shrug of the shoulders and beckoned me to follow him into the room. Colonel Wharton lay on his back in the great bed. He looked ghastly and never moved his head when we entered. I walked to one side of the bed and saw that his eyes were open and that he was staring at the ceiling.

"Colonel," I said softly.

He turned his head slightly and looked at me without any emotion in his tired eyes.

"Colonel," I continued, leaning over and speaking with great intensity, "I want to know where you got the Red Diamond."

A startled look came into the weary eyes and his lips began to move ever so little.

But no sound came from them!

Doctor Henderson plucked me by the sleeve and motioned me to leave the room with him. After the door had been closed and we had gained the hallway I turned to him anxiously.

"Can't he speak?"

"You saw for yourself," he said curtly.

"Won't he ever be able to speak?"

He shrugged his broad shoulders.

"That's a hard question to answer, but there's no prospect at present. He has a most definite attack of aphasia. At first I thought it was paralysis, but a careful examination satisfies me that it is not. So far as I can tell, the shock of the news you tell me about has rendered him speechless."

"Is there any hope that he will be able to speak?"

He smiled sadly.

"While there is life there is always hope. Aphasia is sometimes permanent and sometimes temporary. Another shock such as caused the trouble may relieve it. All that we can do is to wait."

The others were waiting in the living-room and when we reached there the doctor explained the condition of the patient. All were disturbed at the news except Jacquette. The Brazilian seemed to experience a sense of relief, and a few minutes later, when I went in the garden, I found him walking with his shoulders straightened out and humming a lively tune. He must have noticed the surprise on my face, for he hastened to say:

"I am so glad that our dear friend is not fatally

stricken. It is disturbing, of course, but I had feared that it was paralysis, which is often fatal."

He gesticulated with those expressive hands while he spoke, and I know I detested the man. Victor Jayne joined him presently and the two of them strolled in the direction of the summer house, talking earnestly and in low tones.

A few minutes later I met Doctor Henderson and we talked of the Red Diamond and of the sad effect the *Chronicle* story had upon Colonel Wharton.

"If he was only able to say a few words," I lamented, "it would mean so much to all concerned. If there was only some way of having him communicate with us—"

I stopped suddenly. An idea had flashed across my brain. I looked at the physician wildly.

"Doctor," I cried, "he can understand what is said to him—"

"Why, yes," he interrupted, "but what of that?"

"I have it then!" I exclaimed jubilantly.

"How?"

"A slate and pencil," was my response; "that's all we need."

"By Jove," he retorted, "but you're right! How is it that I didn't think of that? I'm becoming stupid in my old age."

In less than five minutes we had secured the necessary articles and returned to the sickroom. Doctor Henderson leaned over and told the patient that I was about to ask him a question concerning the Red Diamond which it was important for him to answer. He exhibited the slate and a gleam of intelligence came into the eyes of the stricken man. He was propped up in bed, the pencil placed in his fingers and the slate placed before him.

"Now, Colonel," I said, "write the name of the man who gave you the diamond."

He grasped the pencil firmly and in a moment the pencil began to move. I held the slate in position and we both leaned over and watched in breathless silence. He wrote laboriously and in scrawling lines. No better evidence could be given of his dreadfully weakened condition. One word at a time appeared before us. We looked and read:

"The Red Diamond was given to me by —"

And at that critical point the pencil slipped from his nerveless fingers and he fell back on his pillow exhausted and almost unconscious. Twice I replaced the pencil in his fingers and each time it slipped away. Finally Doctor Henderson interposed:

"We'll have to quit for the present," he decided.

"I'm afraid of the effect of the exertion in his present condition. It may kill him."

I left the room and slowly walked down stairs deeply disappointed.

CHAPTER XIII

I AM DENOUNCED AS A SPY

BEFORE breakfast the next morning I had a long distance telephone call from Bromley Barnes. The veteran investigator desired to direct my attention to the article in the *Morning Chronicle*. When I told him I had read it he informed me that the account was literally true and correct. His object in calling me, he said, was to let me know that the matter had been formally called to the attention of the State Department by the Brazilian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

"Washington is very much stirred up over the business," continued Barnes, "and for that reason we've got to go the limit to recover the diamond. The Secretary of State has gone so far as to call in the Secret Service. Now this case really belongs to the Special Agents of the Treasury and we don't want to fall down on our work and let the other fellows come in and get the glory. Do you get me?"

"Perfectly," I replied.

"I've got my end very well in hand," he said,

"but I have a feeling that the climax is going to come pretty soon and I want you to be on the job."

"You may depend on me," I answered, "and if anything new develops I'll keep you posted."

Doctor Henderson came to see Colonel Wharton early that morning. He found him slightly improved but still speechless, and gave orders that he must be kept perfectly quiet. Excitement of any kind, he said, would have a bad effect upon the patient.

Before leaving, he took me aside and told me that he had been making an investigation into the affairs of Colonel Wharton and found them in a very confused condition. He discovered that the Colonel had paid out five thousand dollars in the previous week and that when he was stricken he had been negotiating for the sale of bonds which would yield him something like a hundred thousand dollars.

"Now I'd like to know what he intended to do with such a large sum of money," he concluded.

"It must have had something to do with the Red Diamond," I ventured.

"By Jove," he cried, slapping his knee with his hand, "but I believe you're right. Yet think of the amount of money. Why, it's a fortune — a fortune for a diamond."

"That's true," I admitted, "but you know that when it came to rare gems Colonel Wharton was obsessed."

"You're right, Garland. On any other subject Wharton was perfectly normal, but when it came to his hobby he was utterly irresponsible. I hate to be a busybody. I hate to poke my nose in other people's affairs, but Aunt Sarah has begged me to look after Wharton's affairs and that's my only excuse. It seems to me that he needs a friend now more than he ever did in his life."

"You have said it, sir," I concurred. "He's helpless, and he certainly needs true blue friends at this moment."

"Have you any idea what became of the five thousand dollars?"

"No — but I guess it's gone beyond recall."

"The important thing now is to keep your eye on the hundred thousand."

"I've attended to that, son," he said. "I've got in touch with Wharton's bankers and they have instructions to hold on to his bonds like grim death. He might have signed over some papers for all we know, but they won't be honored. Son," he concluded, with a sweeping gesture, "it's pretty bad when you have to protect a man against himself."

When the Doctor left it was with the promise that he would call that afternoon to see his patient.

"I may be a little late, but I want to see you when I get here, young man. I've got a sort of feeling that you're the only dependable man on the premises."

I did not have the grace to blush at this praise, and I wondered what Doctor Henderson would think when he learned the real purpose of my introduction into Hedgewater House.

Dora and Aunt Sarah undertook the task of nursing Colonel Wharton, and faithful nurses they were, too. There was not a moment when either the one or the other was not at his bedside, watching him with solicitous care and anticipating his every wish. There was a sort of pathos about the business. His eyes followed them round the room with a pleading look and when he attempted to speak he was utterly helpless. His hands, too, seemed palsied, and no attempt was made to repeat the experiment of the slate. I remained away from him in response to instructions from Doctor Henderson, who feared that the sight of me might excite him and bring on another attack.

It was late that afternoon when Dora left the sickroom for the purpose of taking a walk around the garden. She had on a light blue dress and

wore a cap and apron that gave her the appearance of a professional nurse. The outfit was becoming and she looked trim and natty in the costume. She seemed more like herself than she had been at any time since the illness of her uncle. I stood on the step of the museum admiring her graceful movements and debating whether I should join her. At that moment Victor Jayne came out of the house and to speak to her. It vexed me to think that I had permitted him to get ahead of me. Presently they started off together, walking in the direction of the summer-house. I resolved to take another path that would enable me to join them without seeming to intrude.

Five minutes later I reached a turn in the shrub-lined path which enabled me to see them without being seen. Nothing had been farther from my thoughts than to listen to their conversation. Dora was speaking in a tired voice.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Jayne, I'll stay here for a while."

"But the answer to my question," he persisted. "Won't you please say 'yes'?"

"If you insist," she retorted, "I shall say 'no.'"

"You know your uncle's feelings in this matter, Dora. Won't you consider him — and me?"

"Please stop," she pleaded, "no more to-day."

He followed her, caught hold of her skirt, and began again.

"Dora —"

I could not restrain myself any longer. I stepped forward and exclaimed:

"Miss Wharton wishes to be let alone. Surely any gentleman under the circumstances —"

"You here?" he interrupted, scowling at me fiercely.

"Yes," I answered, "I happened to overhear what you were saying."

"Happened!" he cried. "You mean that you were spying on us."

I moved over in his direction with my fists clenched and my face burning with rage. But one look at Dora's white face caused me to abandon my purpose. It would not do to have a scene.

"I was not spying," I retorted, trying hard to control myself, "and you know it."

At this point in the encounter Jules Jacquette strolled along in the most casual manner imaginable. He seemed surprised, yet I was satisfied that he understood the situation. He patted Jayne on the shoulder.

"My young friend," he said, "you must control yourself. You young fellows are so impetuous when you are in love."

I could have cheerfully strangled him on the spot. His ill-timed reference to Dora seemed like sacrilege to me. While this was passing through my mind I noticed him lean over and whisper something in the ear of his companion. Jayne's face gave the faintest flicker of acquiescence, as if to say that he understood his cue. He stroked his stringy mustache and turned to me in an insolent manner.

"Spying does not come very hard to you, does it?"

I raised my arms to strike him, but it was Dora who reached out and restrained me. The four of us were standing in the graveled space in front of the summer house. I shall never forget that scene if I live to be a hundred. I faced him with blazing eyes.

"I shall hold you to account at the proper time and place!"

To my surprise he stepped forward with an assurance and a jauntiness I had never seen in him before. He spoke in a loud voice and as he did so he pointed his finger in my face.

"Mr. Garland — if that is your name — this thing has gone far enough. I accuse you of being a spy! You are an agent of the Treasury Department and you came into this house for the purpose

"'I ACCUSE YOU OF BEING A SPY!'"

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of trapping Colonel Wharton and Miss Wharton. Only this morning you held a long distance conversation with your chief for the purpose of getting further instructions. Under pretended friendship you have been acting the part of a traitor. Your insolent courtship of Miss Wharton has been for one purpose and one purpose only — to get her to make an admission that would convict her and her uncle of defrauding the Government —"

"You lie!" I interrupted heatedly. "And you know you lie!"

Jules Jacquette interposed with his oily manner.

"Victor," he said with pretended fairness, "you have made a serious accusation against this gentleman. Surely you are mistaken."

"I'm not mistaken," was the stubborn retort, "and if you'd like to have some evidence I can show you Treasury Department stationery which I found in his room."

"Evidently," I said, grasping at this straw, "Mr. Victor Jayne is something of a spy."

"I didn't spy on a woman," he retorted.

"Neither did I."

Dora Wharton stood there during this dialogue. Her face was as white as marble and there was a dangerous glint in her eyes. She strode forward now, indignation depicted on her countenance.

"One moment," she cried, "permit me to say a word."

There was perfect silence. The eyes of all were fixed on her. She turned to me in an impersonal manner. She did not address me by name but said abruptly: "You have heard what he said?"

I bowed my head in assent.

"Is it true?"

"The statement that I have spied on you," I began, "is false—"

But she cut me off abruptly.

"I want no explanations," she cried. "I want to know if you are a special agent of the Treasury Department."

I hesitated the fraction of a second and then said in a low voice:

"I am!"

A spasm of pain twitched her face, it went a shade whiter, and she cried in a voice filled with despair and anguish:

"Merciful Heavens! A spy!"

The next instant she turned and hurried away. I ran after her and caught the sleeve of her dress.

"Dora," I cried, "please wait a moment. I can explain—"

She grasped my arm in a grip of iron and cast it off.

"Don't touch me!" she exclaimed in a choking voice. "You're too horrible to live!"

"But, Dora—"

"How dare you insult me by speaking my name? Leave me at once. I can't breathe the same air with you!"

She sped on toward the house, sobbing as she went. I sank on a bench and buried my head in my hands. This was the most crushing blow of all. To cause her pain was exquisite torture to me. To seem base in her sight was the greatest humiliation to which I could ever be subject. The universe toppled about me. My house of cards fell to the ground. All hope of happiness seemed blotted from my life. No one can ever imagine the weight of woe which oppressed me at that moment. I do not know how long I remained there with my sorrow. When I looked up I saw Jacquette and Jayne still standing near the summer-house and smiling at me with sardonic glee. I pulled myself together with an effort. Even in the blackness of my despair I realized that I must not let these rascals get the best of the situation. I strode over to them:

"You miserable puppet!" I cried, shaking a finger at Jayne. "I'll attend to your case later. I have other things to look after at present."

"Your own case, for instance," he sneered, pulling at his stringy mustache.

"Señor Garland is permitting his rage to get the better of his good manners," purred Jacquette in the oily tones I had grown to detest.

I disdained to speak to the Brazilian at that moment and made my way to the house. Dora was in the living-room standing near the windows overlooking the grounds. Her tear-stained eyes showed that she had been weeping, but as I entered the room she drew herself to her full height. I hesitated and she turned her back to me.

"Miss Wharton," I began in a low voice, "I —"

"I don't think there is anything more to be said," she interrupted.

"But surely you will grant me a hearing — even a criminal is entitled to a hearing."

"Being a detective," she exclaimed disdainfully, "you are probably better acquainted with the ethics of criminals."

"You are unkind," I said softly.

She turned on me like a flash.

"Unkind!" she exclaimed, the fire fairly darting from her luminous black eyes. "How dare you use the word? How could you be so despicable as to enter this house under cover? How could you attempt to win my confidence by a pre-

tended affection? I never imagined a man lived that could descend to such a contemptible deceit. And the hypocrisy of it makes your act all the more loathsome."

"But you won't let me say a word in my own defense—"

"What?" she cried incredulously. "Do you want to keep up the farce after the mask has been torn from your face?"

I stiffened at this blow.

"In view of what you say there is nothing for me to do but to leave Hedgewater House. I merely wish to say that I promised Doctor Henderson that I would remain until he came here this evening."

She laughed mirthlessly.

"So you've fooled him, too? And you seem to be very scrupulous about your promise. Well, there's a train leaving Hedgewater at seven-twenty to-morrow morning. If you have any shame left take that train."

I bowed.

"It shall be as you wish. Some day, perhaps, you may think better of me."

I ascended the stairway to my room. As I looked over the banister I saw her leaning against the curtains, the tears streaming down her cheeks.

CHAPTER XIV

BEHIND THE SUMMER-HOUSE

THE world had gone black for me. Never, since embarking upon the curious enterprise, had I felt so thoroughly depressed and disheartened as I did after that interview with Dora Wharton. The expected had happened, but, alas! I found myself unprepared for it. In the early part of this narrative I accused myself of living in a fool's paradise. The truth of that accusation was now more evident than ever. I was disgraced in the eyes of Dora. What else mattered?

But presently this black mood passed. My heart was as heavy as lead, but I was determined to fight the battle until the end. I could still see the tear-stained face of the girl I loved, but beyond it I caught the grinning, leering countenances of Jacquette and Jayne, and I made up my mind that they should rue the day they brought unhappiness to the heart of Dora Wharton. I might never succeed in regaining her love and confidence, but I would make them know they had been in a battle.

I did not go down to dinner at the usual hour.

The thought of sitting at the table with Jacquette and Jayne was intolerable. Dora and her aunt, I was satisfied, would not be there. Truly a desolated home, with these two rascals making themselves comfortable and in command of the situation. That last thought filled me with unavailing rage. But were they in command of the situation? Time alone would tell.

I busied myself in making out a report and in the meantime kept on the watch for Doctor Henderson. It was dusk when he finally arrived and, after giving him time to visit his patient, I went downstairs and stationed myself in the hallway where I would be sure to meet him. He came out presently, a look of gravity upon his round face.

"Doctor," I began, "before we go any further I'd better tell you something about myself. I—"

He cut me short.

"I know all about it," he said. "There's no need of going into details."

I looked at him in amazement.

"How in the world did you know?"

He smiled grimly at that.

"The ladies told me. You don't suppose they could keep a secret like that, do you? They came to me to express their indignation."

I looked at him critically.

"An indignation, I presume, which you share with them."

He had edged into the living-room by this time and he looked about to see if we were alone. Then he looked at me through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Well, son," he said finally, "none of us like to be fooled, do we?"

I admitted the impeachment.

"No, of course we don't. And, least of all, women. They were very properly angry at you, and I think that if I had been in the place of Miss Dora I should have been tempted to have scratched your face. As your amiable countenance seems unblemished, I take it that she considerately refrained from inflicting that deserved punishment."

"I thought you might have taken a different view of it," I said, miserably enough. "I can assure you that I would die sooner than do Miss Wharton an intentional wrong."

He caught me by both shoulders and pushing me away at arm's length looked squarely at me with those honest old eyes.

"Son," he exclaimed finally, "the biggest compliment I can pay you is to say that I believe you."

"Thank you," I replied, a mist coming before

my eyes. "It is perfectly true that I came to this house as a representative of the Treasury Department, for the purpose of getting on the track of the Red Diamond. It is equally true that I came here in the guise of an assistant to Colonel Wharton. For that deception I will probably lose the love of one who is most dear to me. But I merely obeyed the orders of my superiors. I presented myself under false pretenses. I'm not proud of that phase of the business and I guess I'll always have qualms of conscience about it, but I want to assure you, Doctor Henderson, that I have not done a thing since I have been in this house which would cause me one moment of shame."

"There, there," he cried, turning comforter. "I didn't ask for any explanation. You've got an honest face. That's enough for me. As for the rest of it, I think your coming here at this time and under existing circumstances may prove to be providential to Colonel Wharton and his niece."

I flushed with joy.

"That's the very feeling I've had, Doctor, and I wasn't conceited enough to put it in words. And I propose to see this thing through. I'll leave here in the morning — you know I've been ordered off the premises — but my heart will remain here and I will not neglect the interests of your friends."

[redacted]

[redacted] you may depend upon [redacted] smiling through his glasses, [redacted] your stay here I [redacted] you be mistress of the [redacted]

[redacted] "That would never [redacted] it will be desirable for [redacted]

[redacted] Suppose I were married?"

[redacted]

[redacted] — and, besides, you [redacted]

"[redacted]" he cried. "I be here most [redacted] I needed. I'm getting on in years [redacted] like a daughter to me. I'll sacrifice [redacted]"

"So will I," I said simply.

He laughed heartily at that and repeatedly clapped me on the shoulder, which was his method of showing that he was pleased with me.

"Oh, you young fellows," he cried, "how you do talk the sentimental nonsense!"

He left with the understanding that he would call in the morning and with a promise that he would spend much of his time at Hedgewater House until I returned.

"For you will return, son," he said, giving me a sly poke in the ribs. "I know, because I'm a student of human nature."

That interview relieved me immensely. It took part of the weight of woe off my heart. After the departure of the Doctor I went out into the grounds and smoked a cigar. I made my way to the edge of the river and gazed at its rippling waters with deep feeling. It looked both romantic and tragic in the moonlight and it filled me with fancies suited to my state of mind.

For more than half an hour I remained by the riverside, musing and recalling the events of the previous days. It began to get chilly and I started back to the house. The moon was obscured by the clouds at that time and I had to carefully pick my way. A few yards ahead I could see the corner of the summer-house and at a distance the mansion loomed up in the dark like the hull of some great ship. Slowly I moved along, feeling my way like a blind man.

Suddenly out of the blackness of the night I saw a little red speck of fire. It appeared midway between the summer-house and the big dwelling. At intervals it disappeared and then reappeared. The cause of the seeming phenomenon came to me suddenly and made me chuckle. It was nothing more

or less than the lighted end of a cigar, and, of course, it was in some one's mouth. I was about to call when I was arrested by the sound of conversation. And the next second I heard the name of Dora Wharton mentioned.

It was quite evident, by this time, that the two men were Jules Jacquette and Victor Jayne. They were headed for the summer-house, and I remained motionless until they entered. There was the scraping of chairs and I knew that the Brazilian was seating himself in that luxurious manner which was characteristic of him.

"Ah," he exclaimed, with a long-drawn sigh. "It's a blessed relief to get out here where we can neither be seen or heard."

The moon, emerging from its obscurity, sent a flood of light across the grounds and I dropped down on all fours for fear of being seen. It was not a comfortable position, but it was directly in the rear of the summer-house, and it enabled me to hear without being seen. I had not the slightest compunction about listening. The mere mention of Dora Wharton's name was ample justification to my mind. From the occasional flickers of light it was evident that Jacquette was puffing away at one of the heavy black cigars which he always carried with him. There was an impatient scraping

of one of the chairs and I heard the querulous voice of Victor Jayne.

"What the devil did you bring me out to this hole of a place for — to see you smoke your vile cigars?"

There was a purring laugh and then the caressing voice of the South American saying:

"Softly, softly, my dear Victor. Your impulsive American ways jar me. This is not a hole of a place. It presents a splendid view of your magnificent country. And the cigar you call vile is one of the finest imported brands."

"Oh, get down to business!" exclaimed Jayne.

"Well," retorted the other, raising his voice slightly, "one feature of the business is to warn you that your devilish temper is liable to ruin everything. Another is to tell you that you've got to make haste. A sensible man in your place would have had the girl by this time. You've got to make her accept you — and do it right away or the game is lost. The conditions could not be better. The old fossil of a Wharton is helpless and the young gamecock of a Treasury agent has been discredited. She'll have no more time for him. So if you have an ounce of cleverness in your thick skull you'll bring the thing to a conclusion."

The reference to a thick skull did not seem to

please Jayne and he answered in a surly fashion.

"Cut out the talk about my brains. You're supposed to have all the talent in the combination. But I want to ask you a question. How do you know that Wharton may not recover and spoil the whole business?"

"There is not the slightest danger. I can give you my personal assurance that he cannot possibly recover his speech — that is intelligible speech — within the next forty-eight hours."

"What do you know about it?"

"Ah, my dear Victor, that is where the knowledge of your despised Brazilian comes into play. I studied medicine for four years and I made a specialty of mental diseases. I did not get my diploma, but I can assure you that I know more than many practising physicians."

"Has Wharton mental trouble?"

"Not yet — but who can tell what may happen? At present he is suffering from what is known as ataxic aphasia in which the function of articulation is lost or perverted. There are two kinds of aphasia — amnesic aphasia and ataxic aphasia. In the first the memory of words is lost or perverted, and in the second — with which Wharton is now afflicted — there is usually a total loss of speech. This comes about by reason of lesion of the brain,

and often leads to insanity. Everything depends upon the treatment. Henderson, who is looking after Wharton, is an unusually able man. He understands the case thoroughly and if the improvement continues he may have him talking within the next three days."

"Talking," gasped Jayne, "then he may blab the whole business! He may say things that—"

"That we do not want him to say," finished the Brazilian. "Well, that sounds serious, but it is not so serious as you would imagine. But even if Wharton gets better he will not be able to pronounce words distinctly for weeks. The best he can do will be to make signs to indicate that he understands what is being said to him. After that he may be able to pronounce words of one syllable."

"Like a child learning to speak?"

"Yes, only much worse. It's a curious disease, Victor, and most fascinating. I remember one case in Brazil when a patient, an engine driver, on being asked his trade could only answer by saying, 'hish, hish, hish,' to indicate the sound made by an engine in starting. But—"

"Oh, blast your medical talk," growled Jayne. "I didn't come out here to listen to a lecture."

"Nevertheless you are getting it," was the bland

retort, "and if you've got the sense of one of those little ants out in the garden, you'll profit by it. Now we've got to act quickly. Do you understand? Make yourself agreeable to the young woman. Be kind, be sympathetic. She is just in the mood when she needs sympathy, bruised heart and all that sort of thing. Oh, you young men. You are so stupid. If only I had the opportunity, I — Jules Jacquette — could show you how to make love."

As he spoke the big fellow arose and walked across the summer-house. I could hear the creaking of the wooden floor with his heavy weight.

"It's too blasted cold for me to stay out here any longer," grumbled Jayne. "I'm going in — you can do as you please."

"I please to go in too," was the quick retort.

They passed out of the little house together, and as they did so the Brazilian pulled a large yellow silk handkerchief from his pocket. Immediately the air was filled with the odor of musk. The young man gave a sniff of disdain.

"Why the de··il don't you stop using that horrible stuff?"

"Poor unfortunate," mimicked Jacquette. "You have no soul."

"But I've got a nose."

As they moved away I gradually raised myself to

a sitting posture. I was stiff from lying on the cold ground and every bone in my body ached. It was a great relief to get up, but just as I did so I heard the two men coming back. Instantly I dropped down again, out of sight.

"What did you leave there?" asked Jayne peevishly.

"It was my cigar case — I'm sure it is in here somewhere."

I heard the noise of the big South American moving about and feeling for the missing article. He leaned over and once he came so near to where I was hiding that I could hear his heavy breathing. Presently there was a scratching sound and I knew that he was lighting a match. I crouched closer to the ground; I held my breath for fear of being discovered. I am as brave as the next man, but I did not relish the idea of an encounter with these men in that lonely place. The Brazilian and his confederate were desperate and there was no telling what they might be tempted to do if they learned that I had overheard their compromising conversation. In a moment I heard the voice of Jacquette.

"Ah, my little beauty, there you are!"

The little beauty, of course, was his cigar case. Evidently he had found it and put it in his pocket,

for they left the place for the second time. I could hear the voice of the South American.

"Victor, you should be glad of one thing; that bantam Garland has received his walking papers."

Jayne gave a sneering laugh.

"Oh, that fellow never bothered me — I wasn't afraid of him."

"Just the same you can thank me — Jules Jacquette — for discovering his identity and for staging the scene that caused his dismissal."

I clenched my fist with rage. I might have known the Brazilian was responsible for the most unpleasant episode of my life; I might have known that Victor Jayne had neither the invention nor the cunning to contrive such a shrewd method of disgracing me before the girl I loved.

This time the two rascals actually entered the house and I was able to stand up and stretch. Soon afterwards I entered the main doorway and went directly to my room. I was in no mood to see any one, and even if I had been, there was no one to see. The master of Hedgewater House helpless; Dora nursing her grief, and these two unprincipled men having the run of the establishment.

I sat at my window for a long time staring out at the cold waters of the Harmony River and trying to think out a definite plan of action for the next

day. My mind worked slowly and I could not think clearly. But one resolution framed itself quite definitely. I would go to Dora Wharton the first thing in the morning and warn her against Jules Jacquette and Victor Jayne.

I might have my labor for my pains, but that would not deter me from doing what I conceived to be a plain duty.

CHAPTER XV

I QUIT THE HOUSE OF MYSTERY

My sleep was troubled during my last night at Hedgewater House and I awoke early in the morning. In spite of the shortness of my stay I had become attached to the place and I contemplated leaving with regret. But I had a theory regarding the Red Diamond which I wished to talk over with Bromley Barnes and the necessity of this interview fitted in nicely with my forced leave-taking of the House of Mystery. But was it wise to leave the place in possession of two clever and unscrupulous men like Jacquette and Jayne? That phase of it had been carefully considered, and was provided for, as the reader will learn later.

It may be asked why I did not place the Brazilian under arrest? The answer is plain enough. In this country a man cannot be arrested on suspicion. There must be a warrant sworn out or he must be caught in the act of committing a crime. I was quite willing to believe anything against Jacquette, but so far I did not have a shred of evidence that

would stand the test in a court of law. It is true that I overheard him scheming with Jayne in the effort to have Jayne marry Dora Wharton. But if all the men who schemed to get rich wives were arrested it would be necessary to enlarge the prisons and penitentiaries.

While I dressed I looked out of the window in the direction of the Harmony River. It was a chilly morning and the difference in the weather reflected itself in the Rhenish appearance of the rippling waters. It was a beautiful view from that upper bedroom window and I enjoyed it more than once during my brief stay. As I gazed out now I became sensible of something different in the outlook. I looked again and the cause of it became apparent. A small motor boat was tied up at the wharf of the Wharton estate. That seemed strange at such an early hour in the morning. As I finished dressing I went closer to the window and saw a man skulking about the summer-house. He moved around, gazing on the ground and searching in the grass. Who could it be? What did he want? He acted like a person who had lost something. Once or twice he stood up so that I was able to get a good look at him. Suddenly I made a discovery. He was the man in the gray suit who had been lurking about the house the day I ar-

rived and who had been seen on several occasions after that.

It would be a big thing to capture him. He could not be engaged in any legitimate enterprise. Else why the sneaking about the premises? I resolved to go down and try to get him. At that moment he happened to look up and he saw me at the window. It filled him with a sort of panic, for he took to his heels and ran like one possessed. But the pocket of his coat caught in a nail in the summer-house and halted his flight. I could see the look of impatience on his face as he tore it away and resumed his run toward the motor boat.

I hurried down, but it was too late. The man and the motor boat were both gone and as I reached the bank of the river the speedy craft was already halfway across the stream. I managed to get a good look at the man's face, however, and I felt confident that I could pick it out of a thousand. He had a smooth face, sharp features and little ferret-like eyes. There was nothing more that I could do at present, so I made my way back to the house, disappointed, and wondering how the business would end.

I was quite as firmly resolved as ever to see Dora Wharton before leaving the house. At that early hour I was the only one astir and I sat on a bench

in the garden and considered how and when I should speak to her. I made up my mind that I should not present myself in the breakfast-room. That would not be agreeable to her and would place me in the position of trying to force myself on her company. While I was debating this matter Amy Smith, the maid, appeared. She came to me rather shyly, twisting the end of her apron in her nervous fingers and scarcely lifting her eyes. From the look of her face she had been weeping.

"If you please, sir," she said, with a half curtsey, "I've prepared some breakfast for you. Would you like it now?"

I was on my feet in an instant.

"Nothing would suit me better, Amy," I replied, "and I think you were very considerate to think of me."

She seemed overcome with embarrassment at these words and hurried back to the house. None of the other servants had arisen at this hour, so that she not only prepared my breakfast, but served it as well. All through the meal she exhibited evidences of emotion which I attributed to her goodness of heart over my departure. I felt flattered to think that I had won the good will and confidence of a servant of whose existence, heretofore, I had only been vaguely conscious. Amy was not a beautiful

girl. She was not even good-looking. She had large features and pleading eyes like an animal that begs for a little kindness. In the largeness of my heart I wished to say a pleasant word to the girl. I handed her a coin, and said casually:

"Well, Amy, I'm sorry to leave you."

She lifted the edge of her apron to her eyes and wiped away a fugitive tear.

"Not half so much as I am to see you go, sir," she answered with a sniffle.

This was embarrassing. I hoped that Amy had not been so foolish as to fall in love with me. She soon disabused my mind.

"I'm scared at this house, sir. I don't know which way to turn. Somethin' terrible is always happenin'."

I laughed in spite of myself. Yet the girl had described the situation perfectly. Even those who were more sophisticated than this domestic had felt the haunting influence which she had described so well in her homely manner. As I glanced up at her I was struck by the look of terror in her eyes. It was not assumed. It was genuine. I attributed it to superstition. I was at a loss regarding what to say to reassure her. But she relieved me of the necessity.

"There was a man here this morning," she said,

speaking rapidly. "He came in a boat and he crept all around the summer-house."

"Yes," I said, waiting to hear more.

"Yes, sir," she continued, "and he's the same man that was a-creepin' around the hedge on the night you came here."

I nodded. The girl's words confirmed my own impressions.

"You're right, Amy. I caught sight of him from the window, but when I got down he had gone."

"Yes, sir," she said, bobbing her head and picking nervously at the end of her apron. She stood there for a moment as if undecided what to say next. I imagined that she wanted to tell me something more, but in a moment she turned on her heel and fled from the room.

Her talk about the man in gray had set me thinking. When I left the breakfast-room I strolled out into the garden and made my way in the direction of the summer-house. There were footprints in the soft earth, but they did not have any special significance to me. I walked around the side of the house and noticed a bit of cloth fluttering in the wind. A closer examination proved that it was part of a coat. It was not more than two inches in diameter but to me it looked as big as the Flatiron

Building. It was the piece of cloth that had been torn from the coat of the man in gray when he was rushing to get away in the motor boat!

It was important evidence and I placed it in my wallet for future use.

It was becoming increasingly evident that the next move in this game of blind-man's-buff would have to be made in the city. I was eager to see Bromley Barnes and to compare notes with him. I felt more positive than ever that we were getting "warm," as the children say, and that the most trivial incident might lead to a solution of the vexatious problem. I looked at my watch. The next train for the city would leave in thirty minutes, but before leaving the house I wanted to have a word with Dora Wharton.

To my gratification I saw her going into the living-room and I walked in that direction. As I reached the doorway she was seating herself at the piano. She opened a piece of music and began to play it, but she had not finished more than three or four bars when she stopped abruptly and buried her face in her hands. Who can tell how much I suffered as I stood there watching her distress? Presently she raised her head and began drumming listlessly on the keys. Now I felt was my time — now or never. Would she see me? Would she

speak to me? Well, the only thing to do was to make the attempt. I walked into the room boldly enough, but my heart was beating rapidly and I know that my face was flushed.

"Miss Wharton," I said in a voice that faltered in spite of my resolution, "will you favor me with a word before I leave Hedgewater House? It may be the last opportunity I may have of speaking to you."

She turned slowly on the piano stool and faced me. I was prepared to see a change in her, but the sight that met my gaze disturbed me more than I like to admit, even at this late day. Her face was as white as chalk and there were dark lines under her eyes. That inquiring, quizzical expression which had charmed me so much in the beginning was gone now and in its place there was a look of hopeless grief. It seemed impossible that any one could have changed so much in twenty-four hours.

"Well," she said, and the dull despair in her voice smote me to the heart.

"There are two things I want to say," I began, doing my best to speak steadily. "One concerns myself and the other affects you. I want to make you understand that I have not willfully deceived you. It is true that I came here to get a clew to the

Red Diamond, but I had no idea that you were here and when I met you and — and — became acquainted with you our relations had nothing whatever to do with the sordid business of the diamond."

"I suppose," she said, in a wearied voice, "that I am expected to believe all of this."

"You must," I exclaimed with spirit. "If I gained your confidence — and your friendship — in any way it was not for any ulterior motive. The — the regard I had for you was for yourself alone. You have inspired in me feelings —"

"Please stop," she pleaded.

"I will," I continued, "if you will say that you accept my words. There is no penance that I am not willing to do, no sacrifice that I am not willing to make if you will only believe that I cared for you and still care for you in a disinterested, honest and manly fashion."

"There is nothing I ask of you," she replied, in that cold impassive way, "except to leave me."

I was conscious of flushing to the roots of my hair. I could stand her anger and even her disdain, but this dull despair, this cold indifference, was almost more than I could bear. I bowed, however, and said:

"It shall be as you say — I am leaving now."

She turned, as if to resume her music. But I was not finished.

"There is another thing, Miss — Miss Wharton. I have tried to prove that I am disinterested. Believe me, I beg of you in this instance. I want to warn you as a friend — misunderstood, perhaps, but still a friend — against Jules Jacquette and Victor Jayne. The first is a scheming rascal and the other is pretending to care for you, but it is only —"

She halted me with an angry gesture. She had risen and her eyes were flashing fire. A touch of color came into her cheeks, and I do not think she ever looked more beautiful than she did at that moment.

"Sir," she cried, in a rising voice, "you are adding insult to injury."

"But," I pleaded, "it is for —"

"I don't want to hear you," she exclaimed, halting me for a second time. "I refuse to listen to slanders against my uncle's guests and from — from one who has been convicted of deceit."

I was furiously angry now, and if I had followed my impulses would have grabbed her and compelled her to listen to my words. She hastened away, but I called after her in a loud voice.

"If I have been convicted, it has been unjustly.

You have not given me a chance to defend myself. You shut your eyes and your ears to the truth. But I propose to save you in spite of yourself. I'm not going to ask your permission. I'm through with protestations. From now on it's going to be action. Your uncle, lying there helpless, seems to be at the mercy of these rascals. But I'm going to save him, and while I'm at it I propose to save you from that designing coxcomb, Victor Jayne."

I was shaking with excitement when I finished, but I was satisfied. I knew that she heard my words and I was relieved in getting them out of my system, as the saying goes.

Five minutes later I had my suitcase in hand and was going down the graveled path toward the gate. I could not help thinking of how I had come in that same entrance only a short time before and the chain of incidents that had occurred since that time — incidents, startling in themselves and affecting my future happiness.

Just as I was passing out, Amy Smith darted from behind a hedge and with downcast eyes bade me good-by. The devotion of the poor soul made me feel good. It was pleasant to think that one person, at least, in that place regretted my departure. I took her by the hand.

"Good-by, Amy, and good luck to you."

"Good-by," she said, putting the everlasting apron to her eyes.

As I started away she called after me:

"Mr. Garland, you'll come back, won't you?"

"I don't know," I answered, "that depends upon circumstances."

"Oh," she cried plaintively, "I hope you do."

It seemed to me that she wanted to tell me something. Indeed, all of her actions that morning indicated that she had something on her mind. But she let me go without taking me into her confidence.

At a turn of the road on my way to the station I looked back at the house and fancied that I saw Dora Wharton peering from behind the white shades of her room. What was she thinking? Did she care for me in spite of all that happened? Would we ever meet again? I dismissed these queries with a sigh and kept on my way.

A little later I looked back again and this time I saw the faces of Jules Jacquette and Victor Jayne staring after me from the window of the room occupied by the Brazilian. There was no doubt about the way they felt. They were openly exultant. They were rejoicing over having rid themselves of an annoying adversary. The big South American was rubbing his expressive hands across his closely-cropped hair, and I could imagine him

telling his companion that from now on they would have the field to themselves. Perhaps he was depicting me as a deserter and telling him that there would be no one to watch them or to checkmate their moves.

If he was saying that or if he was indulging in any such hope he was badly mistaken. No word was spoken between us, but at the moment I left Hedgewater House I was automatically relieved by Harry Hapgood. Even as I boarded the train, that astute detective was taking his place inside the hedge-lined gardens of Colonel Wharton's estate.

I had left the House of Mystery, but a man equally as capable was on guard to see that truth and justice had fair play in this battle of wits.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MOTH AND THE FLAME

I FOUND Bromley Barnes in his office, with his feet elevated on his desk, smoking a Pittsburgh stogie and reading Bill Nye's "Comic History of the United States." That might have seemed discouraging to an enthusiastic amateur sleuth, but I knew my old friend well enough to realize that he was neither indifferent nor indolent. His hobby consisted of collecting the works of American humorists and he said that he found in their pages not only the needed relaxation from the cold matter-of-fact problems which he was compelled to face every day, but also the inspiration which helped him to solve some of his most vexatious cases.

He tossed his book aside when I entered the room and called on me for a recital of all the events which had occurred at Hedgewater House since our last meeting. I told him everything clearly and in detail, and the fact that he lifted his shaggy eyebrows more than once convinced me that he was deeply interested, if not amazed, at my revelations.

He asked me many questions, and was particularly anxious to know if I had left Hapgood on the job. My answer in the affirmative satisfied him. He paid special attention to the little square of cloth which I had found near the summer-house and he looked at it through a microscope with the manner of an expert. After that he leaned back in his chair and lit a fresh stogie.

"Hugh," he said reflectively, "the more I think of this case the more I am reminded of the old story of the moth and the flame. You have often heard of the gruesome fascination which draws the murderer back to the scene of his crime. That is a fact which has been proven by experience. But it does not stop at murder. It holds good of other forms of crime. The criminal does not rest easy. He is nervous, impatient, ill at ease. It is so in this case. The man who has been skulking around Hedgewater House is only another instance of the moth and the flame. He will never rest until his wings are burned."

"You seem confident?"

"Perfectly," he replied. "You have a bit of cloth there. It is our business to find the suit of clothes of which it was a part and after that the man inside the suit of clothes."

I laughed.

"May I ask what you have been doing at this end of the line?"

"That is not only your right but your duty. I've been trying to round up all of the diamond dealers in town. And I've been successful, too. The process of elimination has been going on. I've discarded all of those that are beyond suspicion and have only retained a few that would be likely to yield to temptation, or that would deliberately engage in unlawful business. There are just four of these and they are all located on "Diamond Row," which is the popular name for Commerce Street, where most of the jewelry houses are located. I'm going to make the round of these shops this afternoon and I want you to go with me."

"What do you expect to find?"

"How can I tell?"

"But I thought you had some special object in view."

He laid his hand on my shoulder in a kind, fatherly sort of fashion.

"My boy, the one thing in view always is the Red Diamond. Aside from that, we are going on what the lawyers call a fishing expedition. How it will turn out I can't begin to guess. We may not even get a nibble."

Commerce Street proved to be a quaint little thor-

oughfare in the heart of the business section of the city. It was quite unlike any of the other streets in the vicinity. It had a flavor and a character all its own. Both sides of the street were lined with curious little shops, all related in one way or another to the trade in jewelry and precious gems. One establishment dealt exclusively in diamonds, another in old gold and silver and a third in antiques of all kinds. Across from these three might be found a shop, the owner of which bought and sold and exchanged any old thing of merit. This included venerable plates, historic letters, colored prints and even false teeth, especially those that might have been used by historic personages of bygone ages. There was something fascinating about the exterior of these places which made one reluctant to pass them without going inside and exploring their interiors.

Bromley Barnes was on familiar ground. He knew most of these shops as well as he did the old book stores that lured him inside their walls in a search for first editions and rare copies of the works of great American humorists. He had with him the list of the four "suspects." We went into the first of these and under the pretense of examining the stock managed to get a look at the proprietor, a wizened up old man who appeared quite as

ancient as any of the antiques with which he was surrounded. After we had been there about ten minutes Barnes gave me a significant glance and said:

"Nothing doing!"

That was the signal for our departure. The second and third places were equally unproductive of results, but the moment we stepped into the fourth shop both of us felt instinctively that this was to have some bearing upon the chase for the Red Diamond.

The establishment was so cluttered with stuff of all kinds that it was almost impossible to move around. There were two or three narrow lanes amid the piles of ancient articles and we made our way through them as best we could. The thing that first arrested my attention was the large number of clocks in the place. They were of all sizes and kinds and they ticked in the most inharmonious manner imaginable. There were grandfather's clocks, six, seven and eight feet tall, as stately and impressive as the ages from which they descended, and in gross juxtaposition was a series of elaborate mantel clocks, some of them only a few inches high.

There were cases containing precious stones, firearms, Sheffield plate, coins, stamps, engravings,

portraits, miniatures, old books, Indian curios, snuff boxes, cameos, laces, old illustrated music, old violins, and, surrounding these, specimens of Colonial furniture. Never outside of a public museum had I seen such a curious collection of odds and ends. No one seemed to have charge of these things, but presently there was a shuffling noise and an old-young man came from behind a screen at the far end of the room. The moment I beheld him I gave a start of surprise.

It was the man I had seen skulking behind the shrubbery at Hedgewater House.

I looked twice to make sure that I was not mistaken. The second look confirmed my first impression. It was the midnight prowler and the man who had been searching the summer-house that very morning. There could be no mistaking the smooth face, the sharp features and the ferret-like eyes. And, as if to make assurance triply sure, there was one other distinguishing mark.

He wore an old gray suit — the suit I had seen so often between the bushes at Hedgewater House.

He advanced toward us now, rubbing his hands together and bowing incessantly. Evidently he regarded us as customers and was fearful that he might do or say something to scare us away. Little did he realize that nothing could drive us from

that establishment until we had transacted the business for which we had come. He smiled, but said nothing. It was the veteran investigator who opened the conversation.

"Might I ask your name?" he said bluntly.

The smile faded slightly as the old-young man replied:

"Glazier — Hartley Glazier."

Barnes waved his hand in my direction:

"This is Mr. Hugh Garland," he said, "who is considered an authority on precious stones."

The little eyes of the antique dealer narrowed as he looked at me.

"Mr. Garland," continued the man, "is the advisor and assistant of Colonel Basil Wharton of Hedgewater House."

Mr. Hartley Glazier drew back at this as if some one had struck him. If such a thing could have been possible I would have said that his leathery face became pale.

"Yes," he said, finally. "Is there anything I can do for him? Is there anything in particular he wants?"

"Yes," proceeded Barnes, with great deliberation, "he wants the Red Diamond!"

Glazier gasped. He caught hold of the corner of a bookcase to steady himself and the little eyes

looked like tiny specks of fire. Never was agitation more plainly shown in a man's face and manner. He made a brave effort to recover himself and only partly succeeded. When he spoke it was in a tremulous voice.

"I don't know why Mr. Garland, or any one else, should come to me about a red diamond."

"Not *a* red diamond," corrected the old man harshly, "but *the* Red Diamond."

"Yes, yes," was the nervous rejoinder. "I presume that you refer to the famous Brazilian stone called the Star of the South."

"You don't presume — you know!" asserted the veteran.

The look of alarm in the diamond dealer's eyes deepened and then slowly died out and gave way to a look of resentment and defiance.

"I don't know you," he said to Barnes, "and I don't like your manner. Unless you have business with me you'll have to excuse me."

"We have business with you and we won't excuse you," persisted the detective.

"What do you want?"

"I've told you — we want the Red Diamond."

"You're crazy; I haven't got the Red Diamond."

Barnes looked at him intently. After a while he spoke again.

"If you haven't got it maybe you'll tell us what you've done with it."

"Who are you, anyhow?" demanded Glazier.

Barnes then threw his coat open and displayed the little gold badge of the United States Treasury Department. The diamond dealer recognized it at once and the effect it had upon him was shown in the altered tone of his voice.

"I haven't the faintest idea of the whereabouts of the diamond you mention. I only wish I had, sir."

"Why?" came the sharp query.

The suddenness of the question and the manner of the detective disconcerted Glazier.

"Why — eh — it's very rare and — and I can always find customers for rare gems."

"Quite likely," commented Barnes, drily, "but it would take a Carnegie or a Rockefeller to buy that diamond."

"But I don't know why you come to me with such questions?" said Glazier, peevishly.

Barnes turned to me with a peculiar grin. He pointed to the old-young man.

"Cross-examine," he said shortly.

"Mr. Glazier," I began in a lawyer-like fashion, "when were you at Hedgewater House last?"

He paused for a moment and moistened his lips

with his tongue. When he spoke it was in a tone of defiance.

"Never heard of it."

"Oh, yes, you have. It's the home of Colonel Basil Wharton, and until a short time ago it was the resting place of the Red Diamond. Now just refresh your memory. Haven't you heard of Hedgewater House?"

He glared about him like an animal at bay. It was some moments before he spoke and then it was in a halting way.

"Why — yes. Now that you remind me of it. I have heard of Hedgewater House. But I don't know anything about it. I've never been there."

"Oh, yes, you have — at least you've been in the garden."

"Have I?" in a voice of pretending incredulity.

"Yes," I said, adopting a bantering tone, "and we've met several times."

"I never met you," he exclaimed, positively.

"Well, maybe we didn't exactly meet, but we were in sight of one another."

"When, for instance?"

"The second night after the arrival of the *Dom Pedro,* when you were hiding behind the bushes at Hedgewater; the same night when you looked in the

window and saw Colonel Wharton exhibiting the diamond, and this morning when you crept around the summer-house and then hurried away in the motor boat!"

With each succeeding accusation Glazier gave a gasp, but when I had concluded he cried triumphantly:

"How are you going to prove all this?"

"This is very easy. When you were running away this morning your coat caught in a nail of the summer-house and you left a bit of the cloth from your coat."

"Well?" he asked, trembling.

I had pulled the square of cloth from my pocket while I was speaking and when he said this I swung him around suddenly and there, in plain view, we saw that a piece of his coat had been torn away. I quickly applied the fragment of cloth to the torn part of his garment.

It fitted the space exactly and the piece of cloth matched the goods of his coat.

His face was a pasty white now, and he trembled violently. For the moment he was speechless. Before he had time to recover, Barnes exclaimed in a business-like way:

"Put out your hands."

Without realizing what he was doing he did as

he was told. The next instant the detective had clasped a pair of shining handcuffs about his wrists.

Whether he thought resistance was useless or whether he was too much dazed to protest is more than I can tell. At all events he went to the station house with the meekness and the docility of a lamb. I do not pretend to be versed in the law of the land, but the manner of his arrest and imprisonment struck me as rather high-handed.

"Do you have the right to arrest him?" I asked as we were leaving the station house.

"He's arrested, isn't he?" was the non-committal reply.

"Sure."

"Well, that's enough for the present. We can argue questions of law later."

I grinned.

"We seem to be making progress."

"We are," he admitted, "even if it's not evident to the eye of a layman. You know, son, this is a case of conspiracy and conspiracy — in a legal sense — is one of the hardest things in the world to prove. It's like a chain, as I have often said before, and each link must be connected with the other. We have two links in this chain so far. One is the steward of the *Dom Pedro*. Another is the diamond dealer. That's encouraging."

"Yes," I said, "but we haven't got the Red Diamond yet."

"You're right," he agreed, with a faraway look in his blue eyes. "We haven't got the Red Diamond yet."

CHAPTER XVII

HOUSE OF A HUNDRED KEYS

BEFORE breakfast next morning Bromley Barnes had a long distance telephone call from the Third Assistant Secretary of State asking him if there was any further information concerning the mystery of the Red Diamond. The Washington official said the Brazilian Minister had called at the Department the day before and informed the Secretary of State that his Government was very much exercised over the disappearance of the gem, and was willing to go to almost any extreme to recover it. The Third Assistant said that while the United States Government did not accept any responsibility in the matter, it would like to serve the Brazilian Minister to the best of its ability. He was sorry to hear from Barnes that the diamond had not been recovered and suggested a "little more ginger" on the part of the Special Agents of the Treasury would be very much appreciated by the State Department.

The old man smiled grimly as he put up the receiver.

"What would he think," he asked me, "if he knew that the Red Diamond was smuggled into this country in the trunk of the Spanish Ambassador?"

I smiled in reply.

"I don't know, unless the thinking might bring about a declaration of war between Spain and Brazil."

The incident had the effect of reminding both of us of the importance of the quest in which we were engaged. Also it set my mind working in another direction.

"By the way," I said, "I want to refresh my mind about these twin diamonds."

"Fire away."

"I understood you to say that the Star of the South had been cut into two perfect diamonds; that one of these had been placed in the National Museum in Rio Janeiro and that the second after passing from one hand to another had finally been smuggled into this country."

"Correct!"

"Now what I am driving at is whether there has been any confusion as to the identity of the stones. You felt perfectly satisfied in the beginning, as I understood it, that the diamond which was smug-

gled into this port belonged to a private collection in Brazil. Now you say the diamond brought here was taken from the National Museum. How do you know which is which? How do you know the diamond which is supposed to be in the United States does not belong to the private collection in Brazil?"

"A fair question, fairly put," replied Barnes. "I'll try to enlighten you. We know that the stone which has mysteriously disappeared does not belong to the private collection because we have a cablegram from Juan Fernandous, the owner of that collection, saying that his half of the Star of the South is still in his possession and that it has never left him since he purchased it."

"So that it never came here."

"It never came here — that is perfectly evident."

"But a red diamond did come here and it was the Red Diamond that was stolen from the Museum in Rio."

Barnes leaned back in his chair with a look of amusement on his face.

"My boy, you've stated it with perfect clearness. There is no hocus-pocus about this matter. What is known to fame as the Star of the South — or half of it — has been stolen and smuggled into this

country. It is not paste or imitation; there has been no substitution, and this gem is worth a fortune to its holder."

While we talked a message came from the ever-faithful Hapgood saying: "All's well and the goose hangs high." This was his way of saying that the situation at Hedgewater House was unchanged and that he was still on guard.

That simple message had the effect of vividly recalling the events of the last few days to my mind. I could see myself in the office of Collector Fread hearing the story of the Red Diamond for the first time and receiving my instructions concerning the part I was to play in its recovery. Then came the advertisement which had taken me to Hedgewater House as an assistant to Colonel Basil Wharton, and after that my first view of that house of mystery at night with the creepy sensations it had induced. Most vivid of all was my recollection of my first view of Dora Wharton, full of life and vivacity, with her quick, graceful movements, her glossy black hair, her quizzical, questioning eyes, and her smiling lips. When all remembrance of this strange adventure had passed away, that portrait would remain fresh in my memory.

Jules Jacquette came next with his big head resting on his thick neck, his closely-cropped gray

hair, his compelling gray eyes and those large, greedy, expressive hands — the hands that gave you a key to the character of the man. At my first meeting I felt the magnetism of this person and yet at the same time I entertained an unconquerable distrust of the man. I recalled his eagerness as Colonel Wharton had shown us the Red Diamond — a pool of flame in that dimly lighted room.

Then came the sight of the man in gray skulking behind the hedge and peering in at the window; Dora receiving the strange letter which had unnerved her, and, as a climax, my discovery of her opening the safe in the dead of the night. What agony of mind that scene cost me no pen can ever tell! Bromley Barnes next appeared in my mind's eye, telling me the story of the thirteenth trunk, and explaining how the clever smugglers had used the Spanish Ambassador in working a new trick on the customs officials. In quick succession came the news of the robbery of the museum at Rio Janeiro, Victor Jayne's attempt to win Dora Wharton, the sensational denunciation of myself as a spy, my discovery of the duplicity of Jacquette and Jayne while hidden behind the summer-house, my quitting of the house of mystery and finally the dramatic arrest of the diamond dealer. These startling events had occurred in such rapid succession that they

seemed more like a strange dream than incidents in my own life.

But there was Bromley Barnes in the flesh, smiling as usual, and gazing at me in a quizzical sort of way, as a reminder of the actuality of these queer occurrences. While I sat there day-dreaming, he was thinking out a plan of action for hastening the dénouement of the mysterious business.

"I'm having John Johnson brought here," he said, "for the purpose of trying a little experiment on him — the thing that was invented by Inspector Byrnes of New York and which has worked successfully in many cases."

The office of Bromley Barnes in the Appraiser's Department was on the second floor and overlooked a little courtyard which separated this part of the Customs House from the Collector's office. While we were sitting there two officers brought in the white-faced steward of the *Dom Pedro*. His confinement had not improved his appearance. He looked sullen and defiant. Barnes seated him in an arm chair overlooking the courtyard.

"Now, Johnson," said Barnes briskly, "I'm ready to hear what you have to tell me about the Red Diamond."

"How can I tell you anything," was the irritable retort, "when I don't know nothin'?"

"You mean you didn't know anything in the beginning," suggested the veteran, "but I'm sure your short rest in prison has refreshed your memory."

"It ain't refreshed nothin'," was the sullen reply.

"Come, come now," prompted Barnes, "tell us the names of the men who were with you in this scheme."

"There wasn't no scheme," said the steward in a sing-song way.

"Remember," warned the detective, "I'm giving you your chance and if you don't take advantage of it it will be your own fault."

"Why don't you let me alone?" whined Johnson. "I can't tell you what I don't know."

"You mean you won't tell."

"I didn't say that," retorted the steward with an attempt at dignity. "You're just puttin' them words in my mouth."

"If you won't tell," cried the chief angrily, "there may be others who will."

At that point he managed to direct the glance of the prisoner to the courtyard below. Two officers appeared leading a man between them. His head was sunk on his breast and he seemed hopelessly despondent. Presently he raised his eyes and looked up.

The man was Hartley Glazier, the diamond dealer from Commerce Street!

A quiver passed through the steward of the *Dom Pedro*. I could see the muscles of his face contracting. He appeared to be on the point of speaking, but gradually the emotion died away. So near and yet so far.

The experiment was a failure.

Bromley Barnes realized this before he spoke. Yet he addressed Johnson more as a matter of form than anything else.

"Once more — have you anything to say?"

Johnson shook his head.

"Take him away," said the chief, and the next moment the officers were leading the steward out of the room.

"It didn't work," admitted Barnes to me.

"It's old stuff," I ventured, "and he's too bright a bird to be caught with any such chaff."

Barnes didn't like that but he accepted his failure good naturedly.

"The fellow's guilty," he insisted, "but he had more nerve than I expected. You noticed him shiver, didn't you? Well, that satisfies me all right — all right."

"What about Glazier?" I asked.

"I was just coming to that," he said. "Here's

the stuff we found on him when he was searched."

The detective pulled a woolen bag from the top drawer of his desk and emptied it on the table. It was a curious collection resembling the riff-raff usually found in a boy's pocket more than the articles carried by a man. There was a wallet, with some bank notes, a quantity of silver and small change, a gold handled penknife, a silver watch, some circulars advertising an auction sale of antiques, a bunch of keys, an old-fashioned copper penny, a book of postage stamps, a piece of string, a package of cough drops and a small latch-key.

"What do you call that?" I asked.

"That's the evidence — there's enough there to convict any man."

"It doesn't seem very incriminating to me," I said, honestly enough.

"Do you remember telling me that Colonel Wharton drew five thousand dollars from bank just before the disappearance of the Red Diamond?"

"Yes, I got that from Doctor Henderson."

Barnes nodded.

"Well, I took the trouble to go to the bank and get the number of the notes. They were in denominations of one hundred dollars. Do you see this note?"

He was holding up a one-hundred-dollar bill before my astonished gaze.

"How could I help seeing it?" I replied, with twinkling eyes. "Put it down or you'll blind me."

"That note," he said impressively, "is one of the bills which was drawn from the bank by Colonel Wharton. Query: how did it come into the possession of this diamond dealer?"

"Colonel Wharton was a purchaser of curios of all kinds," I ventured.

"Yes," agreed the veteran, "but that will not do as an explanation in this case. I have my own theory but I'll let it simmer in my brain for a while."

As he talked he began sorting the articles that lay on the desk. He turned to me:

"That bank note was one bit of evidence. Now look and see if you can find anything else that might furnish a clew to the case we have in hand."

I looked for some time and then pointed to the small latch-key.

"That looks as if it might unlock the mystery."

He laughed.

"You have all of the characteristics of a good detective. I thought the same thing but so far I haven't been able to do anything with it. My theory is that this is the key of a room where Glazier

has hidden some of his secrets. Query: where is the room?"

"Have you looked anywhere?"

"We've examined all of the rooms in his shop without result. This key must unlock some door in another part of the city. My theory is that it is a vacant house — that is to say an unoccupied house. But there are a thousand such houses in this city and I wouldn't know where to start. Besides, even if I did, when could we ever complete such a task?"

While he talked I had the key in my hand and was examining it — and thinking. Presently an idea came into my head and it filled me with joy. I turned to Barnes.

"You couldn't do it alone, of course. But why not get the assistance of the city police. Chief Kelly's a good scout. He'd lend you a hundred of his men for a day."

Barnes stared at me.

"Hundred men with one key — Hugh, you must have been drinking."

"No," I retorted. "I mean a hundred men with a hundred keys."

He stared at me.

"Give me that key," I said, "and in an hour I'll have a hundred duplicates made for you."

He leaned over and gave me a cordial slap on the back.

"By Jove," he cried, "I'll have to hand it to you, boy. You have some gray matter in that head of yours. The thing's so obviously simple that it never occurred to me."

Ten minutes later the key had been left with a locksmith with instructions to make the one hundred duplicates. After that we proceeded to the office of the chief of police. Kelly, the czar of the local force, sat at a desk in a room filled with tobacco smoke. He recognized Barnes through the haze.

"Hello," he cried, "in trouble?"

The old man smiled grimly.

"That's a fine way to greet an old friend," he retorted.

Kelly laughed.

"You fellows are all the same. You lambast the regular police and call us a bunch of boobs, but when you get a nut you can't crack you bring it here. Now own up. Isn't that the truth?"

The blue eyes of the veteran investigator danced merrily.

"Well, it's not exactly that way, but—"

"But you've come here to ask my help," interrupted the chief.

"Yes," confessed Barnes, "we have."

That put Kelly in excellent humor. He pulled out a box of cigars and insisted upon each of us taking one before he would talk business. After they had been lighted and the smoke in the room had become more dense he exclaimed:

"Now, fire away — I'm at your service and I'll go the limit."

Barnes put the case to him in a very few words. He explained all that had been done and said that it was extremely important that he should find the house with a door that had a latch which could be opened with this particular key.

"We're having a hundred keys made," he concluded, "and we can furnish your men with these keys."

Kelly looked at the old man with undisguised admiration.

"Say," he said, finally, "the key business is a new stunt to me. I've never heard of pulling off anything like that before."

"But can you help us?"

"You bet we can. This town is divided into fifty police districts and I'll put two men in each district on the case at once. They'll tackle all the unoccupied houses. They know 'em all right. And after that, if necessary, they'll try every door of every house in this bloomin' town. If you do a

thing, do it right. That's my motto. And we'll get results for you or I'll eat my shirt."

In a little over an hour the keys had been made and delivered to the irrepressible Kelly. He got into telephonic communication with each of the districts and by sundown that evening the keys had been delivered. Barnes was pleased when all of the preparations had been concluded and so was I. We felt so well satisfied with ourselves that we went to see a musical comedy that night.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," quoted the veteran. "We need the relaxation and it may help to brush the cobwebs out of our heads."

We reached the office bright and early the next morning, and tried to piece together the various odds and ends of the case. It must have been ten o'clock when the telephone rang and the cheery voice of Chief Kelly was heard at the other end of the wire.

"It's all right, old fellow," he called to Barnes. "We've located the house you want. It's at the very edge of the city line, at the beginning of the Burlington Pike. Hammond, one of my best men, is there now, and he'll wait until you come and turn the business over to you."

Barnes was profuse in his thanks and in a few minutes we were in an automobile and on our way

to the suspected house. Curiously enough it was on the way to Hedgewater and about half way to that place. The structure proved to be an old-fashioned dwelling which looked as if it might have been once the home of a wealthy man. It had a terraced front and the yard was overgrown with weeds and grass. It was built on Colonial lines with a quaint front door and green shutters. There was an iron knocker on the door and the thing breathed the atmosphere of 1776. But the whole business was rapidly going into a state of decay. The paint was peeling off the door and the shutters and the place looked as if it had been abandoned for many years.

We found Hammond standing on the front porch smiling blandly and holding the magic latch-key in his hand.

"The boss," he said, "told me to give you this key and to take a day off for my pains."

"You've earned it," admitted Barnes. "Here, stick this in your jeans."

He slipped a gold piece into the hand of the delighted officer, who went his way, bowing and scraping as if he had received a decoration from a sovereign.

We lost no time in going through the house and what we found there more than fulfilled our wild-

est expectations. It had been used as a storehouse, and it was almost filled with silks, velvets and other expensive goods that had been smuggled from abroad. Barnes, with his experienced eyes, recognized many of the articles, and was able to name the vessel upon which they had been brought to this country.

"This is one of the biggest hauls I've ever made in my professional career," he said, "and even if nothing else comes of it, we'll make a big hit with the Department. My boy, you deserve promotion for this, and you'll get it if I have any influence with the big fellows at the front."

"How about the Red Diamond?" I asked.

"I don't know — let's look for it."

We spent three solid hours in going through every nook and corner of the House of a Hundred Keys — for that is what Barnes persisted in calling it — but we were unable to find the slightest trace of the missing diamond.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MYSTERIOUS LETTER

BEFORE we left the neighborhood of the smugglers' house Barnes had communicated with Collector Fread and arranged to have it watched day and night. He was in high spirits and insisted upon calling me the hero of the House of a Hundred Keys, a title which I modestly disclaimed. Both of us were disappointed at not finding the diamond, but we felt the discovery of the house had somehow brought us nearer to the climax of the adventure.

When we reached the office a red-haired messenger boy was waiting for me. He came from Hedgewater House as the bearer of a confidential message from the imperturbable Hapgood, detective and philosopher. In this communication he assured me that he had watched the house and its inmates with the faithfulness of a dumb beast; that he could give a detailed report of the movements of every member of the household, including the number of cigarettes smoked by Jules Jacquette. As the

net result of all this the only thing he had to report was the finding of a letter carelessly dropped by Miss Wharton — the said letter being duly enclosed and marked "Exhibit A." in the case of the Red Diamond.

It appeared that Dora had gone out riding the afternoon before. On entering the automobile she opened her hand bag to get some small article. In the confusion of reaching for various personal possessions she had unknowingly dropped the letter. Hapgood, from his post of observation near the entrance, had seen the bit of paper fluttering to the ground and at the first opportunity thereafter, like a faithful detective, had picked it up and, later, sent it to me.

My first impulse was to become angry at Hapgood for his presumption, but on second thought I realized that he had done what he regarded as his duty. Dora, in his eyes, was simply one person in the little drama and not entitled to any more consideration than any of the other characters in the play. The enclosure was a single sheet of paper, on which the following was written in lead pencil:

> The Customs detectives know that the Red Diamond has been placed in the safe. They expect to go after it to-night and if they find it your uncle will be arrested as a smuggler and as such will be liable

[redacted]

I gasped with surprise when I read this remarkable communication and then I gave a shout of joy. Its significance and its importance were self-evident.

It was the mysterious letter which Dora Wharton had received on the night the Colonel had first exhibited the Red Diamond. It was the communication which had caused her so much suffering. It was written for a purpose and it had accomplished its purpose. I put myself in her place. What would I have done if I had been the girl and had received such a warning? Filled with terror, I should have attempted to save Colonel Wharton at any cost.

It was that feeling which had prompted the girl to arise in the middle of the night and to remove the diamond from the safe.

Joy and grief struggled for the mastery as these thoughts rushed through my mind. I was filled with delight at the realization of the fact that Dora Wharton was as innocent of wrongdoing as an unborn babe. I was filled with anguish at myself for having, even in thought, considered her capable of anything that was not honest and straightforward.

But the loyalty of a woman to those she loves knows no limit and it was the knowledge of that trait which had crowded my mind with misgivings.

My first impulse was to rush to Dora and abjectly beg her forgiveness for having doubted her integrity. My second thought was how I could utilize this letter in helping to solve the mystery which hung over Hedgewater House and which threatened to destroy the happiness of so many innocent persons. I folded the letter carefully and placed it in my wallet and endeavored to look the facts in the face.

What had Dora done with the Red Diamond and where was it at this moment? The answer to these two questions might save me much work and worry. But even if she knew would she be willing to give me the information? She disliked me, she distrusted me — aye, she seemed to hate me. I tried to face the situation honestly. What had happened to change this state of affairs? I had learned that she was duped by an anonymous letter, that she had removed the Red Diamond from Colonel Wharton's safe, and that later it had probably been stolen from her by some other person. I was naturally delighted to learn that Dora, so far as known, was guiltless in the matter. My mind was partially re-

lieved. But would that fact cause her to change her feelings toward me? I feared not.

The next question to consider was the identity of the person who had sent her the anonymous letter. I went over the list of persons who would be likely to do such a thing. Could it be Jules Jacquette? I was willing to believe anything against the man, but was it likely that he would write such a letter in order to have the girl take the diamond from the safe? Was it not more likely, if he wanted the diamond, that he would await some more favorable opportunity for getting it? I thought of Victor Jayne — the detestable Victor Jayne — who had exposed and humiliated me before the girl I loved. He would do anything to injure me, but it was difficult to see how the disappearance of the diamond could be made to affect my standing in the house. I was sure that he would not halt at any crime to advance his own interests, but how would it help him to have the diamond removed from the safe? Not at all unless he intended stealing it, and the obvious distress of both Jayne and Jacquette over the disappearance of the gem satisfied me that they were not the senders of the warning note.

That left one man who might have been the author of the anonymous communication. It was the man behind the hedge, the man in the gray suit, the

diamond dealer — Hartley Glazier. He was obviously seeking the diamond. He must have been peering through the window that night when it was placed in the safe. What more likely than that he should resort to some ruse to prevent it from being kept in the burglar-proof place? As I thought over this I pulled the letter out of my wallet and looked at it again. It was written in a scrawling hand, and yet the wording of the epistle suggested an educated man. At least it was not the language of an illiterate person. Besides, the handwriting itself did not prove anything. More than likely it was disguised.

Bromley Barnes was engaged in clearing up the accumulation of work on his desk. He finished, and as he lit a fresh stogie I passed him the letter.

"Here's a fresh bit of evidence sent to us from Hapgood," I said.

He read it through hastily and then re-read it with great care. After that he rubbed his chin reflectively and gazed into space.

"This is good stuff," he said, finally, "the question is, who sent it to the girl."

"Aye," I repeated ironically. "That's the question."

"What's your guess?"

"My guess is. Hartley Glazier."

He pursed up his lips and smote the desk with a bang.

"Not a half bad guess — and since the discovery of the House of a Hundred Keys I've learned to respect your guesses."

I smiled and went through the business of protesting, but Barnes was thinking — thinking deeply. In a little while he arose and pointed his finger at me dramatically.

"I've got it, son — we must get a specimen of Glazier's handwriting."

"Yes," I admitted, "but how?"

"But how," he repeated, nodding his head, "but how?"

A long silence followed and then the veteran of the force outlined a scheme. It was simple enough and had the advantage of having been tried before. He proposed to put a stool pigeon in the cell with Glazier, and then, under some pretext, of having this stool pigeon ask the diamond dealer to write a letter for him. Within the hour he carried his scheme into execution. It worked like a charm. The fellow, charged with drunk and disorderly conduct, was thrust into the same cell with Glazier. His right hand was bandaged. He asked the diamond dealer to write a note at his dictation. It was addressed to an imaginary individual who was im-

plored to come and get him out of jail. Glazier bit with the eagerness of a brook trout. He was evidently glad to do anything to while away the time.

It gave us precisely what we wanted — a specimen of the diamond dealer's handwriting. The note, after the usual form of address, said:

> I want you to come here at once and get me out of prison. It is unneccessary to tell you that you will have to go my bail. If you do not act promptly I may be sentenced to a term in the work house and that is something I cannot contemplate with equanimity.

Barnes held the note in one hand and the anonymous letter in the other and compared them very carefully. Finally, he said:

"On the face of it I would say that these letters were written by different persons, but I want to have a session with our handwriting expert and after that I'll be able to give you a definite opinion on the subject."

He left the room and I devoted myself to writing some routine reports which had been neglected during my absence at Hedgewater House. It must have been an hour later when Barnes returned in company with a little old man with sparse gray hair and a fringe of beard under his chin — a perfect reproduction of what Horace Greeley must have

looked like in the latter days of his life. The investigator motioned in the direction of his companion.

"You know Phillips — our handwriting expert."

I nodded.

Barnes beamed upon him in his most benevolent manner, and assumed the air of a manager showing off his pet performer.

"Phillips," continued the detective, "tell our young friend here what you make out of the letters."

The expert, thus addressed, adjusted his spectacles and cleared his throat.

"I find," he said, pointing to the first epistle, "that this letter is written in an assumed hand. The writer has attempted to disguise his usual style."

"But the two letters," I interrupted impatiently, "are they written by the same person?"

He bowed assent.

"They are written by the same person."

"How do you know?"

"There are three things which lead me to this conclusion," he said. "The first is that the shading on the tails of certain letters is almost identical. When the writer has occasion to make a 'g' or an 'f' or a 'y' he invariably leans heavily on his pen or his pencil and we notice an unusual shading.

This is characteristic of all these letters in both communications. The second thing is the writer's method of connecting certain of his words. This is a habit quite common with telegraphers or those who write a great deal, or who are compelled to write rapidly and under great pressure. It occurs several times in each of these letters. Finally there is a similarity in the spelling — that is to say, in each letter the writer has misspelled the word 'unnecessary.' In each case he has used two 'c's.' These things, together with what I might call the atmosphere of the letters, convince me that they were written by one and the same person. It is most conclusive to me. I cannot tell how it may impress you two gentlemen."

"It satisfies me — down to the ground," cried Bromley Barnes.

"And me, too," I concurred, with a smile.

After the quaint old gentleman had left the room we turned and looked at one another and exclaimed simultaneously:

"Glazier!"

There was not the shadow of a doubt but that the man in gray who lurked behind the bushes had sent the warning letter to Dora Wharton.

We were now perfectly satisfied that the steward of the *Dom Pedro* and the diamond dealer of Com-

merce Street were two important links in the mystery of the Red Diamond. At least another would be needed to legally prove the smuggling conspiracy.

Where was he or she to come from?

CHAPTER XIX

AMY SMITH'S STORY

THE jingling of the telephone bell announced a message from the sleepless Hapgood. He informed me in a voice which bellowed over the wire that an "interesting incident" had occurred at Hedgewater House. That incident was the dismissal of Amy Smith, the maid. It seems that she had overheard a conversation between Jules Jacquette and Victor Jayne and in an excess of zeal had reported it to Miss Wharton. But the clever Brazilian and the pussy-footing Jayne had twisted it to her disadvantage in such a way that Dora refused to have the girl remain with her any longer.

Hapgood found her weeping in the grounds and in the course of his talk with her discovered that she had something on her mind. She admitted that the "something" in question might affect those with whom she had been living. He used all of his powers of persuasion to induce her to tell him the secret, but to no avail.

"If Mr. Garland was here," she wailed, "I'd

tell him. He's the only one I'd trust and I'm sure he'd understand."

As a result of this the diplomatic Hapgood made her promise that she would come to me at once, and she was now on her way to the office. Hapgood took it all as a matter of course and as part of the day's work, but it was important news for me, and I hung up the receiver and waited for the girl with ill-concealed impatience.

During the interval I endeavored to refresh my mind concerning Amy Smith. For the first time I began to attach significance to the strange actions of the girl. Her tearful, homely face rose up to accuse me of lack of acumen. Why had I not watched her while I was at Hedgewater House? It was Aunt Sarah who had first called my attention to the girl with the statement that she was grieving because her expected marriage had been indefinitely postponed. The chap she was engaged to marry had lost his money and for that reason the date of the nuptials had been canceled. I remembered, too, her agitation over the loss of the diamond and the scared, tearful look which she seemed to constantly wear. At the time I ascribed this to the natural emotion of a loyal domestic. Might it not have a deeper significance? But speculation was useless. I would soon have the opportunity of talking with

her and in her state of mind it was quite possible that she might tell me something of importance. How important it was to be did not even dawn on me at the time.

While this was going through my mind there came a timid knock at the office door, and the girl was announced. Her appearance was pitiable in the extreme. She was dusty and disheveled, and her tear-stained face was enough to melt the heart of the sternest official. It was evident that she must be handled gently and that was the line of procedure upon which I immediately determined. I bade her to be seated, patted her on the back and asked what I could do for her.

"Oh, Mr. Garland," she cried excitedly, "I've got something I've got to tell you right away. I can't keep it any longer; I must tell it or it will kill me."

"There, there," I said, kindly, "don't excite yourself. Go ahead and tell me anything you wish."

She glanced up with a half-hunted and half defiant look on her face. Her gaze fell on Bromley Barnes.

"I won't tell you nothin' while that man's in the room. What I've got to say is for you alone."

Before I could say a word Barnes arose with a

smile, and reaching for his hat left the office. It was characteristic of the man. He realized the possibilities of the expected interview and he was not going to risk spoiling the thing through any foolish notions of official procedure.

When the door closed the girl seemed on the verge of collapse. But she pulled herself together with an effort.

"Mr. Garland, I've been a terrible bad woman. I was tempted to do something wrong and I done it. Please say you don't blame me, please say that!"

I made some soothing response to this extraordinary demand, and she continued:

"My trouble began the day that awful diamond came to the house — or leastwise the day I thought it came to the house. That very night I got word that my young man had lost his money gamblin' and that we couldn't get married. It hurt me something awful, but I tried hard to forget it and to think only of my work."

"Yes, Amy," I said encouragingly, "I heard about that, now go ahead."

"The terrible thing started the night Colonel Wharton showed that diamond to youse people. The minute I set my eyes on it I says to myself, 'I'd give my soul to have that diamond.' It was a

terrible thing to say, even to yourself, wasn't it?"

"It was."

"Well, I couldn't help thinkin' about it, all night, and I went out into the garden an' did my best to get it off my mind. But the more I tried the harder I thought. Just then a man in a gray suit came up an' handed me a letter which he says was for Miss Dora—"

"That was Hartley Glazier," I interrupted.

"I don't know nothin' about his name. All I know is that I gave it to Miss Dora an' when she read it she got as white as the sheets on her bed. I couldn't keep my eyes off her for the rest of the night. I went to my room but I couldn't go to sleep for thinkin' of that diamond and the terrible look on Miss Dora's face. It must have been after midnight when I came out of my room and looked over the third story landin'. I heard some one in the livin'-room an' I crept down to the second story and I seen that it was Miss Dora takin' somethin' out of the safe. An' I knew it was the diamond an' it made me shake like a leaf. An' then I seen you there starin' down at her an' I run back to my room. I know'd that what she done was none of my business but I couldn't rest. An' about an hour after that I looked out of my window an' seen a man climbin' down the lattice work from the corner

of Miss Dora's room. An' when he got to the ground I seen it was the man with the gray suit."

I gasped, but when Amy would have paused I told her to go ahead with her story.

"What could a poor girl do?" she continued. "I was sure he was a thief, so I got an old pistol I keep under my pillow and shot at him. What with fright and excitement I could hardly stand up. But I left my room and run down to the garden and there was Miss Dora with her hair down an' a dressin' gown on and wringin' her hands enough to break your heart. She started when she seen me an' nearly fainted. But when she found out who it was she said:

"'Amy, did you see a man in the garden?'

"'Yes, Miss,' I said, 'I shot at him from my window.'

"'Oh,' she says, 'then it was you that fired the pistol. Oh, Amy, I've been robbed! That man broke into my room and took somethin' that is very, very valuable.'

"'Shall I give the alarm?' I asked.

"But when I said that the poor creature got more frightened than ever and cried:

"'It's too late! It's too late! And, Amy, you must promise me that you'll never, never, tell a livin' soul what's happened here to-night.'

"An' I promised. And, oh, Mr. Garland, now I'm tellin' it all to you."

"That's all right, Amy," I murmured, soothingly. "You're doing the right thing. Go ahead with your story."

"Well," continued the girl, "I had a terrible time gettin' the poor creature to her room. An' after that I made up my mind to go back to the garden and see if I could find out anything more. I walked down the path toward the gate and when I reached the entrance I seen somethin' on the grass shinin' like the sun. I stooped down and picked it up. It was the Red Diamond."

"Yes! Yes!" I cried, rising from my chair, in my excitement and gripping her wrists, "and what did you do with it?"

Amy was sobbing now, and the tears trickled down her cheeks. She hung her head and seemed unable to speak. I was afraid my agitation might check her revelation and I hastened to assure her that she could have confidence in me.

"I — I hate to tell you the rest of it," she sobbed. "I'm so ashamed of myself."

"Never mind — go right on."

"Well," she said, mastering her emotion, "my first thought was to run upstairs and give the diamond to Miss Dora. But the more I looked at the

thing the harder it was to part with it. It felt as if it was burnin' my hand. Honestly, Mr. Garland, that horrible thing acted like magic on me. I must have stood out there in the moonlight for half an hour tryin' to decide what to do. An' then I gave way to the temptation.

"Miss Dora was sure it was stolen an' I know'd she would never hear that the thief had dropped it in the grass. So I says to myself: Why shouldn't I profit by an accident what had dropped the diamond in my lap, as the sayin' goes. I thought of how rich the Whartons was and how poor I was and that settled the business.

"I never thought when I made up my mind to steal the diamond that it was goin' to be the start of my troubles. The first question was what was I to do with it. I know'd it was worth a lot of money, but I didn't know how much. What could I do with it? I couldn't carry it around in my pocket. It seemed to be blazin'—it was that red and shiny. I couldn't put it in my room. Some one might find it there an' then I might be arrested for stealin'. So I thought and thought and finally I know'd what to do. It seemed simple and safe. I made up mind to bury it!

"An' that's what I done with it. I found a place on the side of the summer-house and I got a

shovel and dug a hole three feet deep. My, but I had the shivers while I was workin' there in the moonlight! The diamond was bare. I don't know what became of the case. Maybe the first thief had it. The diamond must have slipped out of the case when he was runnin' away. Maybe he felt the case in his pocket and thought he had the stone, too. My, but he must have swore somethin' awful when he found he didn't have it! Anyhow, I had a little chamois bag in my pocket and I put the diamond in that and buried it in the hole. I put the dirt back the best I could and smoothed off the top and covered it with some rubbish so that it wouldn't be noticed."

She began to sob again and dabbed her eyes with a tiny pocket handkerchief.

"Don't cry," I said.

"I can't help it," she continued. "That was like a grave to me; a grave in which I had buried my good character. It was the first time I ever stole anything. You believe me, don't you, Mr. Garland?"

"Certainly," I said hastily. "But go on and tell me the rest of it. Is the diamond still there?"

"Yes," she answered, "an' that's what brought me here — to try and repair the damage I've done to innocent people."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

"I'm sure you're repentant," I remarked. "But how is it that you didn't tell all of this to Miss Wharton instead of coming here to me?"

"I'm comin' to that," she replied, "an' my only hope is that I'm not too late."

"What do you mean?" I asked, alarmed.

"I mean that that horrible Brazilian began to see that I did not trust him. He watched me all the time and when he know'd that I heard him and Jayne talkin' together he was bound to get rid of me. I went to Miss Dora and told her these men was no good an' that Jayne was after her money. She was mad at me for tellin' her that and when the big fellow went an' told her that I was listenin' at his keyhole she discharged me. I wanted to tell her about the diamond but she wouldn't even see me. An', besides that, even if I had told her, I was scared that Jacquette would get the best of her and get the diamond anyhow. So I just made up my mind to come and tell you the whole story."

"Why didn't you go and dig the diamond up yourself?" I asked, looking at her shrewdly.

"How could I?" she expostulated, "with them two vampires watchin' every move I made. Anyhow, I was afraid to carry it around with me. Honest, Mr. Garland, the thought of that diamond

gives me the creeps. I ain't no great believer in bad luck, but I just hate to think of what would happen to me if I put my hands on it agin."

I smiled at the girl even while I sympathized with the feelings she expressed so eloquently in her own homely style.

But I realized that the time had now come for action — and for prompt action at that. I looked at my watch. It was ten o'clock. A swift automobile would get us to Hedgewater in less than an hour. While I was thinking, the girl watched me with the solicitude of a dumb beast.

"You ain't ablamin' me for what's happened, are you?" she asked anxiously.

"Not at all, Amy," I said. "You made a big mistake but you've done the right thing in coming to me with your story. Now I'm going to Hedgewater at once and I want you to go with me and point out the spot where you buried the diamond. Will you do that?"

"Yes, sir, and anything else you want me to do."

I left the room and found Barnes waiting in an adjoining office. Hurriedly, but clearly, I told him Amy Smith's story and explained that I was going to hurry to the house at once. For answer he went to the telephone and ordered a taxicab.

"Well," he said, as he hung up the receiver and

turned to me. "You are one lucky boy. It proves my contention though that chance plays a sixty per cent. part in the solution of most mystery cases."

"There's no chance about this," I retorted with some heat. "It was a fortunate thing that Amy Smith came straight to me, but it was in the natural sequence of events. If I hadn't gone to Hedgewater she wouldn't have known me, and if she hadn't seen me peeping over the banister the night Dora took the diamond from the safe she —"

Barnes threw up both hands in mock distress.

"I surrender!" he cried, "you're entitled to all the glory."

I laughed in spite of my irritation.

"No, I'm not," I contended. "You and the Collector planned this thing and I simply did my best to follow your instructions."

"Do you mind me going with you?" he asked.

"Mind it — why I wouldn't dream of going without you."

That seemed to please the old man.

"Very good; and I'd suggest that it might be a good thing to take the Collector along. We may need him — officially, I mean."

He called the Collector on the telephone and by the time he had explained matters the taxicab had

whizzed up to the curb in front of the office and was pumping away at the rate of five cents a minute.

I called to Amy Smith, and as she joined us, said:

"This is Mr. Barnes, who is my superior and who is interested in the recovery of the diamond. He is going with us."

She said nothing but looked at the great investigator in a way that did not betoken complete confidence. We drove to the Custom House side of the building, where we were joined by Collector Fread. He was carefully dressed, as usual, and squeezed into the vehicle with a frown upon his noble brow. He stared at Amy Smith wonderingly.

"We'll explain as we go along," I hastened to say.

"You haven't much room here," he grunted, in no wise mollified. "It doesn't look very comfortable."

"You're going to sacrifice your comfort in a good cause," commented Barnes.

"That remains to be seen," retorted the Collector.

The next moment we had started off, at headlong speed, in the direction of Hedgewater House.

CHAPTER XX

THE GENTLE ART OF SMUGGLING

AFTER Amy Smith had been properly presented to Collector Fread and he had been given a résumé of her remarkable story he thawed out sufficiently to say that she had done justice to her conscience and performed a distinct service to the United States Government. The Collector could not rid himself of his oratorical manner and when he spoke to the shrinking girl it was with all of the ardor and all of the gesticulations likely to have been employed by Henry Clay in addressing the United States Senate.

This might have been impressive within the four walls of the Custom House, but in a sea-going taxi-cab, with a dare-devil driver speeding over highways that resembled the rocky road to Dublin it came very near being a joke. Collector Fread never handed down an opinion until he had first carefully placed his tortoise-shell glasses over his old Roman nose, and just when he had them adjusted to a nicety the taxi would strike a hole in the ground, send the glasses flying into the air and throw the pompous official into the lap of the grinning Barnes.

After this had been repeated five times he gave up all attempts at being dignified and cried:

"Damn it, man; this is worse than riding the loop-the-loop!"

Then, remembering that a member of the gentler sex was present, he apologized handsomely and blamed his bad temper on Bromley Barnes. Conversation, under the circumstances, was so difficult that it was abandoned. The reckless driver was having the time of his life. Aside from the fact that he was an Irishman and red-headed he lovingly thought of the five-dollar gold piece which Barnes had slipped him as an incentive to speed. With this combination a traffic policeman counted for less than the dust in the road, and if the Angel Gabriel had appeared and commanded him to slow up he would have been as blind as a bat and as deaf as a post.

Presently the lights of the city passed from view and the taxi reached the broad, smooth highway leading to the Burlington Pike. It was a happy relief. Collector Fread was not a coward, but there were times when the machine was turning the street corners when each of the hairs on his glorious head must have stood up in solemn, if silent, protest. Conversation was possible now and the Collector turning to me said:

"Garland, I was interrupted in my office while I

was trying to interpret a very vexatious customs regulation."

"Yes, sir?" I answered, interrogatively.

"Barnes has kept me informed regarding all of the details of this peculiar case," he continued. "It seems that some of the relatives of this Colonel Wharton have been alarmed because they feared he might be liable to arrest and imprisonment on the charge of smuggling this Red Diamond into the United States. Am I correctly informed?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "Miss Wharton was particularly distressed on this account and I'm afraid that her fear has caused most of the complications in this case."

"I see," commented the Collector. "Like the Southern darky, she's had a lot of trouble in her time — most of which never happened."

This light and frivolous reference to Dora Wharton did not please me in the least and I hastened to her defense.

"It's happened, all right, Mr. Collector, and the fact that much of it was needless is not going to make the girl feel any better."

He twirled his glasses about for a moment or two and then said to me in his best cross-examining tone:

"This — this Colonel Wharton rested under the impression that he was a smuggler."

"He did."

"Well, he wasn't."

I started up out of my seat at this astonishing statement.

"Why not?" I gasped.

"Simply because nothing was smuggled."

I laughed mirthlessly and slowly resumed my seat.

"Collector, I don't feel like being joshed."

He frowned.

"I don't quite comprehend your jargon about being joshed, but I have distinctly said that there was no smuggling in this case and I repeat it. My remarks need an explanation. Very well; I'll try to explain. Under the law of August 5, 1909, there is an explicit provision made for the free entry of works of art which shall have been produced more than one hundred years prior to their importation. Hence, if an article is permitted to come into this country free of duty it would be impossible to smuggle it. Do you get the drift of my remarks?"

"Yes," spoke Bromley Barnes, "but it all depends upon whether that clause of the tariff bill can be made to apply to this diamond. I know the act very well. It's called the Antique Act. But can you call a diamond an antique? How old is the Star of the South?"

I grinned at the question.

"I should say it was thousands of years old — it must be as venerable as the hills of Brazil from which it was dug."

"Oh, you know what I mean," retorted the old man, impatiently. "How long has it been since it was discovered and cut into its present form?"

"Hundreds of years — beyond the shadow of a doubt."

"Well, that settles the age part," agreed Barnes. "The next question is whether it comes under the provisions of this act. As I understand the act, the article to be admitted free must not only be an antique, but an artistic antique."

"Well," said the Collector, "it's cut — like any other diamond."

"But is that cutting the work of an artist; might it not be done by any skilled artisan?"

Collector Fread turned to me.

"What have you to say, Garland?"

Thus appealed to, I tried to marshal my thoughts so that they might be spoken in a way that would satisfy the official conscience of the Collector.

"I say," I began, "that Barnes is right about the cutting. That may be the work of an artist, but it is not necessarily so. But there is something you all seem to have overlooked, and that is the setting. The sunburst in which that red diamond is set is

a work of art, if ever there was one, and I'll swear that it is over a hundred years old."

"How about that, Collector?" queried Barnes. "Does the setting, if it is artistic and antique, carry the stone with it?"

Fread cleared his throat, adjusted his glasses and pulled down his waistcoat. Then he declared in his most judicial manner:

"Undoubtedly it does. I have gone over the regulations carefully and they tell me that if this diamond had come under our observation in the ordinary way I should have admitted it free of duty."

"Do you mean to say that we have been on a wild goose chase?" demanded Barnes, sternly.

"Hardly," was the stately reply, "because while I have demonstrated officially that the diamond could not have been smuggled, you are all aware that it has actually been stolen. In this case — being a matter of state — I should say that its having been stolen was much more serious than if it had merely been smuggled."

"In any case," I said, rubbing salt into the wounds of Bromley Barnes, "the customs officers were derelict and at fault in permitting the diamond to get through the lines."

"Well," grunted Barnes, "we'll get it now or my name isn't Barnes."

For the first time since the technical conversation began we remembered the presence of Amy Smith. She had been following the talk with open-mouthed wonder. Although uneducated, she was a bright girl and had grasped the significance of what we were saying. The interest of the subject had almost made her forget her own griefs. She looked up now with a wan smile on her homely face:

"Lordy, but this will make Miss Dora happy. Colonel Wharton ain't no smuggler after all!"

The same thought had come to my own mind. If Dora Wharton had only known of this law how much it might saved her. If she had not secretly taken the diamond from the safe! It reminded me of the everlasting truth of the old lines, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave, when first we practice to deceive."

Bromley Barnes was disposed to be cynical.

"I accept the decision which you gentlemen have handed down," he said, "and I want to thank you for your entertaining dissertation on the gentle art of smuggling. It seems that it's not a question of morals at all. It's merely a hair-splitting interpretation of the law. If the setting of that bloodthirsty diamond had been just a shade less artistic, Colonel Wharton would now be a criminal. As it is he is

simply a much-injured and badly-used man. It is laughable."

"Barnes," exclaimed the Collector, sternly, "no one ever said anything about the morality of the case. It's just a matter of being law-abiding. If you're not willing to live up to the laws of the land you're not a good citizen. Many people think they are doing a clever thing if they cheat the Government out of its just dues. It's all a matter of conscience. But you know better than any one else that the Government can't afford to let itself be cheated and that's why it pursues the offenders to the last ditch."

The old investigator had been squirming about in his seat during this discourse and now he straightened up and exclaimed abruptly:

"What's the use of wasting our time with this hot air when we've got important business ahead of us? We're in a hurry!"

Fread adjusted his glasses and looked at Barnes with amazement depicted on every lineament of his well-bred countenance.

"My dear Barnes," he expostulated, "if we went any faster we'd have to use a flying machine. And as for the talk, it hasn't delayed us in the least. Also I can see that it has afforded immense relief to our young friend here."

"Yes," I admitted, "it has, and I'm sure that when we tell Colonel Wharton it will hasten his recovery."

"How about Miss Wharton?" asked the old fox, slyly.

I knew then that Bromley Barnes had been saying more than his prayers. The allusion caused my cheeks to grow suddenly very hot and I hastened to change the subject without answering the Collector's question.

By this time we were in the country, rushing past desolated corn fields and bleak-looking meadows. I knew that we were within a short distance of Hedgewater House and I was mentally mapping out my plan of campaign. I looked at Amy Smith, who was huddled in the corner of the taxi, and told her to be prepared to take me to the spot where she had buried the diamond.

Just about that time the driver of the vehicle was attracted by a man standing in the middle of the road, waving a handkerchief. He put the brakes on and halted the machine just in time to avoid running over the daring person. We poked our heads out of the window to get a glimpse of the lunatic.

It was Burton Hapgood.

He was grinning from ear to ear and he hopped

on to the little footboard with the alacrity of an acrobat.

"I felt it was a hundred to one shot that it was you," he said, addressing his remarks to Barnes, "so I took a chance on halting you."

"But why the circus stunt?" asked the old man, only partly mollified; "couldn't you wait until we reached Hedgewater?"

"Didn't want to risk that," drawled the cheerful one. "I've made a little discovery and thought you ought to know it before you got there."

We all pricked up our ears at that and the Collector suggested that Hapgood might squeeze his way into the taxi.

"Nope," he replied affably, "I'd rather not. Put on all the steam you like. I can hang on to this until we get to the house."

"What have you discovered?" I asked, impatiently.

"Well," he said, in his provokingly slow manner, "I've had my eye on that fellow Victor Jayne. He's been leaving the house every little while and this morning I followed him to the bank. He got the teller to change a hundred dollar bill. After he left I showed the teller my badge and induced him to give me the note in exchange for other money."

"Yes?" I said breathlessly.

"It turned out just as I thought. I looked at the number on the note and it's one that belonged to Colonel Wharton."

"Fine," ejaculated Barnes, "we've got the goods on him!"

"There's something else," continued Hapgood. "They're trying to make that girl marry this fellow. They're at it now in the sickroom. If you hurry you may be able to get there in time to take part in the proceedings."

My heart sank. Every minute counted now and I wondered if we would reach the house in time to save Dora.

CHAPTER XXI

THE THIRD LINK

My heart beat fast as we approached the entrance to Hedgewater House. Although I had spent only a few days there the place was so intimately associated with my hopes and fears that I could not think of it without emotion. The driver of the taxicab swung through the gateway as though he was accustomed to making the turn every day in the week, and in a thrice we had stopped at the side porch.

Burton Hapgood jumped out before the machine halted and he was followed by Collector Fread, who climbed to the ground with as much dignity as the circumstances would permit. I helped Amy Smith down and then Bromley Barnes joined us. While we were grouped on the porch Doctor Henderson came out of the front door and at sight of me his honest face lighted with pleasure.

"Garland!" he cried, impulsively. "You're just in the nick of time. I'm at my wits' end — maybe you can help me."

"First," I interrupted, "tell me if Jacquette and Jayne are still at Hedgewater House?"

"Yes," he rejoined bitterly, "I'm sorry to say they are."

"I'm glad," I retorted with an emphasis that caused him to look at me in astonishment.

"They're up in the bedroom with Colonel Wharton," he said, "and I'd like you to come there at once."

I turned to Amy Smith.

"I'll have to go in the house a while," I whispered, "and in the meantime I want you to locate the spot where you've buried the diamond and I'll join you in a few minutes."

She nodded and walked in the direction of the summer-house. Henderson looked after me in surprise, but before making any explanations I introduced him to Collector Fread. Bromley Barnes he had met before and was glad to renew his acquaintance. Rapidly I sketched to the Doctor the sequence of events, explained to him how Hapgood had caught the hundred-dollar bill that had been passed by Jayne, told him how Collector Fread had dismissed the charge of smuggling and repeated Amy Smith's story concerning the buried diamond. Amazement was depicted upon every line of his countenance. He fairly gasped.

"You bring wonderful news," he said, finally, "and I think your coming at this time is providential. Wharton's improving and this morning I was hopeful that we might be able to make him speak. But the best he can do is to utter the first syllable of a word and then stop short. You know that is one of the common phases of the form of aphasia with which he is afflicted.

"When Dora comes into the room he looks at her mournfully and then points to this puppy of a Jayne. As a consequence of all this, that foxy Brazilian has persuaded the girl that her uncle wishes her to marry Jayne. And she's reached the stage where she is willing to do it. By gad, sir, they were talking about going off and being married when I came downstairs."

I felt a sinking sensation in the region of the heart, but I moistened my lips and managed to say:

"Miss Wharton is of age and if she wants to marry the man I suppose she has the right to do it."

"Marry that fellow!" cried the Doctor, furiously. "Why, I'd sooner lose my right arm than see her tied to him."

"Have you told her that?"

"Certainly, but she won't listen to reason. I don't believe she gives a snap of her fingers for Jayne, but she's as obstinate as the devil, and oppo-

sition only makes her more determined to go ahead. But thank goodness, we can give her some real food for thought now."

"Doctor," I said, "do you think it would help Colonel Wharton if we were to have the Collector explain that he was not liable for smuggling?"

He nodded emphatically.

"It would help him more than any treatment I could possibly devise."

"Now another thing — would a shock hurt him in his present condition?"

"On the contrary, if it is the right kind of a shock it might be the very thing to restore to him the power of speech."

"Very well, then, I'm willing to go upstairs, even at the risk of offending Miss Wharton."

So we filed up the broad stairway, Indian fashion. It was a curious procession, Henderson in the lead, followed by Collector Fread, Bromley Barnes, Burton Hapgood and myself. I was about to tell Hapgood to remain in the garden with Amy Smith, but after his long vigil at the house of mystery I felt that he had the right to be in at the dénouement.

When we reached the first landing I noticed the doors of the Colonel's bedroom were open and I was able to get a good view of the interior. The patient lay on his back on one of those old-fash-

ioned, four-posted mahogany bedsteads which were so popular in Colonial days, but which are now regarded by most persons as relics and curiosities. His face was white and there was a wearied look in his eyes. He looked up as he heard us approaching and it seemed to me that that worn face took on a slight touch of color. His long, thin, aristocratic hands played nervously with the bed clothing.

By his side and leaning over him with solicitude in every feature of her face was Dora Wharton. She was calm enough, but there was a look of hopeless resignation about her that smote me to the heart. I would have given anything for the privilege of smoothing her glossy black hair and of evoking the old familiar questioning look in her beautiful eyes.

She did not glance up, but spoke in an undertone to Aunt Sarah Crilly, who was seated in a chair on the opposite side of the bed. That dear old lady seemed quite crushed with the weight of her woe. Directly behind her stood the Brazilian, with his eyes glued on the man in the bed. He glanced up as we entered and his expression changed. There was the same resoluteness in that big head resting on the thick neck, but he was a man at bay. He raised his hands as a pantomimic expression of his feelings. That gesture with those eager, greedy

hands was at once a salutation and a protest against this unheralded invasion of the sickroom. But, aside from that unpremeditated move, he was affability itself. He moved his great bulk about with the singular agility for which he was noted. He met Doctor Henderson as he was entering the room.

"Ah!" he cried in his carefully enunciated English, "the dear Doctor is back again and we are all so glad."

Seeing me, he thrust out his velvety paw and took me by the hand.

"And the young Mr. Garland — this is indeed one great pleasure."

I dropped his hand with a half shiver. The man positively made me sick and I was not able to conceal my aversion. Glancing up I noticed Victor Jayne, standing on the other side of the room, in the rear of Dora Wharton. Evidently Colonel Wharton was the object of their solicitude — or want of solicitude. I guessed rightly that they had been making an effort to have him consent to the marriage of the girl. I had no doubt the Brazilian was back of it and that it was his final move in the desperate game he was playing.

We were all aroused by the loud, cheery voice of Doctor Henderson. He was greeting Colonel Wharton and at the same time, in his own way, pre-

paring him for the ordeal he was about to undergo.

"Hello again, Wharton," he called, "I've got some good friends here who want to see you. And they've not come empty-handed. They've got some good news."

The patient lifted himself slightly on his pillow and glanced at the newcomers. It seemed to me that there was a look of eager expectancy in his eyes. By this time we had ranged ourselves around the bed. I had a conflicting feeling — it was a feeling of discomfort and of awkwardness, but with it also was a sense of the dramatic side of the thing. I was thinking of this when I heard the voice of Dora Wharton, clear and yet with a certain tremulousness.

"Doctor Henderson, this seems very unnecessary. You have the right to see my Uncle, but —"

"But," he interrupted, blandly, taking the word out of her mouth, "but so have his other friends, and I can assure you, Dora, that every man I have brought with me into the room has the interest of your Uncle at heart."

Collector Fread, who had taken an immediate liking to Doctor Henderson, rubbed his hands and nodded approvingly.

"The first of these friends," continued the Doc-

ear in the tone of a lecturer. "is Collector Fread, who has a word to say to Colonel Wharton."

Fread paused as if waiting for the applause to subside. There was a moment of strained silence and then putting the tortoise-shell glasses more firmly on the bridge of his nose and fixing Colonel Wharton with an official, but yet a benevolent glance, he said:

"Colonel I — ah — that is I am given to understand that you — ah — have some interest in a certain Red Djamond."

The sick man glanced wildly at the speaker and plucked nervously at the bed covers. It looked as if his eyes would pop out of his head.

"Also I am given the impression that you have been greatly distressed because you feared the diamond had been smuggled into this country."

Still the sick man stared at him with that wild, glaring stare.

"If so," continued the Collector, in his most approved platform style, "you may relieve your mind at once. There could be no attempt to escape duty on this diamond because it is not a dutiable article."

He paused to note the effect of this announcement. His love for the dramatic must have been fully satisfied, because Colonel Wharton breathed a sigh of relief, and then, smiling for the first time

since he was stricken, lay back on his pillow for a moment of luxurious relaxation. But the prosy Collector continued as though he were addressing the usual large and enthusiastic audience.

"You ask me why this is so and I tell you that it is so because the diamond in question is an antique, and antiques, under the generous and far-sighted dispensation of our lawmakers, are free from duty."

I noticed that Dora Wharton listened to this explanation with distended eyes and parted lips. It was not difficult to imagine her feelings under the circumstances. Surely she was thinking of the useless sacrifice she had made, of the hours of unnecessary misery, and of the whole train of bad luck that had followed in the wake of the Red Diamond. I wondered if she would look my way. She did not. She stared at Collector Fread while he was talking and after that dropped her eyes to the floor. So far as I was concerned she did not appear to know that I was in the room.

Oh! the unfathomable depths of a woman's heart! The limitless extent of her faith and the unimaginable ferocity of her resentment!

Jacquette had followed the words of Collector Fread with absorbed interest. At first he seemed incredulous, and after that the fleeting changes in his face would have puzzled the most expert physi-

ognomist. Victor Jayne listened with a sneer curling his thin lip, but the general effect of the announcement was one of profound relief. The atmosphere was cleared.

Evidently Doctor Henderson thought it was the psychological moment to spring a second surprise. He turned to the man on the bed.

"We have more news — news deeply affecting a gentleman that has been stopping in this house."

I turned to see what effect this announcement would have on Jules Jacquette. But he was not present. He had evidently slipped from the room. The good Doctor wanted me to accuse Victor Jayne of lying in the conspiracy of the Red Diamond, but I rightly thought that anything I might say would be misunderstood and resented by Dora Wharton. So the task was delegated to Burton Hapgood.

"I have here," began that gentleman with the air of a conjurer who is about to pull a live rabbit out of a high silk hat, "a one-hundred-dollar bill. It is numbered E-588.963.36. I mention this fact to identify it as one of a number of similar bills that were drawn from the bank by Colonel Wharton. We have the proofs of that in black and white. Colonel Wharton was buncoed out of this money by a group of unprincipled swindlers. This money we were able to trace to one of the bunch. He

made the mistake of passing one of the notes in this village. In that way he revealed his identity and gave evidence against himself. He is in this room now. There stands the man."

And as Hapgood finished this longest speech of his life he pointed a skinny finger in the direction of Victor Jayne.

The fellow's face assumed a greenish hue and it looked as if he would drop to the floor. But he recovered quickly, and I have to give him credit for a lot of grit. He stood up there and faced us in the most defiant manner.

"It's a lie," he cried passionately, "and it's more than that. It's a frame up to discredit me in the eyes of Miss Wharton. I know who's back of it — it's that cad there," and he pointed to me. "He thinks if a doubt can be put in Miss Wharton's mind that she will throw me over and that he'll have a chance."

"You're the cad," I cried, impulsively, "for daring to mention her name."

Wonderful are the ways of a woman. Down in the depths of my heart I felt sure that Dora still cared for me; my common sense assured me that she had no love for Jayne, yet in the face of these two facts she rushed to his rescue. I can partly attribute her mistaken generosity to her love of fair

play. She wanted to help the under dog. She spoke now with firmness and dignity:

"It seems to me that if you gentlemen have anything against Mr. Jayne you are going the wrong way about presenting it."

The ferret-like eyes of the conspirator blinked; he grasped at the straw thus presented.

"I was given a hundred-dollar bill as the result of a business transaction with Colonel Wharton," he said, "but everything else that has been said is false and I defy any of you to prove to the contrary."

This was uttered with an air of injured innocence which impressed the girl. She turned to the sick man.

"Uncle, please tell me what you want me to do."

Wharton raised himself up on one elbow. His eyes were glaring and he was in a state of great excitement. He looked at Dora and then pointed a lean finger at Jayne.

"Take — take — take — !" he cried in a choking, stammering tone, and then fell back on the pillow exhausted.

Doctor Henderson leaned over and felt his pulse. Then he spoke in a confidential tone to Collector Fread.

"He's been this way for days. It's the most clearly defined case of aphasia I've ever had in my practice. He can only pronounce words of one syllable or the first syllable of longer words. He stammers and stutters like a man with an impediment in his speech. The only difference is that the stutterer by a violent physical effort manages to express himself. Wharton can't do that. Invariably he stops at the short word and goes no further. We have to guess at what he is trying to say."

"What do you make of it?" whispered Fread.

The Doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Jayne insists that the words of Wharton mean that he wishes Dora to marry the whiffet. Dora seems inclined to think so, too. So what can I do?"

At this point Colonel Wharton raised himself on his elbow again. He was evidently going to try and express himself. I turned to the Doctor.

"Don't you think the effort will be too much for him?"

He spread his hands in a deprecating way.

"How can I tell — anyhow I have a feeling that if he keeps this up he may be able to speak intelligently."

The patient was sitting up in bed now, supported by the loving hands of Aunt Sarah. He glanced at

Dora with tenderness and then pointed his finger in the direction of Jayne.

"You — you — you!" he exclaimed, and then fell back feebly.

The smooth face of the fellow reflected the satisfaction he felt. His ferret-like eyes gleamed.

"Gentlemen," he said, with unexpected affability, "why torture this poor man any longer? It is quite evident what he wants — even though it may be disappointing to you."

While Jayne was speaking Colonel Wharton lay there quietly eyeing him with a never-changing gaze. It was pathetic to see a strong man thus stricken. While I was wondering what should be done under the circumstances the man in the bed seemed to acquire fresh strength. By a supreme effort of the will he sat up straight, without assistance from any one. Every one in the room was startled. It was as though one who was entering the portals of death had suddenly raised himself to life. His face was stern now. He pointed his finger at Jayne for the third time, but now it was with deliberation. The long expected words came from his mouth firmly and distinctly:

"You — you villain!" he cried. "How dare you have the effrontery to stay in my house?"

Victor Jayne was shocked, but he was not the

only one. Those words came from the lips of the sick man with all the solemnity of a judgment. The Colonel turned to Barnes and once more he indicated Jayne.

"Take — take him away. The sight of the man is more than I can bear. He is a rascal. He — he is at the bottom of all my troubles!"

His head fell on his breast and he lurched over on one side. Loving hands cared for him and in a few moments he was lying on his back with his eyes closed and a peaceful look on his face.

"Is — is it fatal?" whispered Collector Fread, in an awed tone.

Doctor Henderson shook his head.

"It's a crisis, but I'm sure it's a turn for the better. I'm sure he will improve from this moment."

In the meanwhile things had been happening in that stately old bedroom. Burton Hapgood stood directly behind Victor Jayne while Colonel Wharton was making his dramatic accusation and the moment it was concluded he slipped a pair of handcuffs around Jayne's unresisting wrists.

"They're real becoming to you," he grinned, as he led the accused man down the stairway.

Doctor Henderson, smiling like a basket of chips, had now resumed his most professional manner.

"Gentlemen," he called out, as if nothing out of the ordinary had occurred, "you really must clear the room. My patient needs quiet and rest."

We filed out of the apartment just as solemnly as we had come in. At the doorway I paused to take one last look. Dora Wharton stood at the head of the bed, her pretty black head pillowed upon the breast of Aunt Sarah, sobbing violently. Was it joy? Was it grief? Or was it the natural reaction that was to be expected after such a strain upon her nerves?

Once out in the sunlight I felt the friendly hand of Bromley Barnes upon my shoulder.

"It's coming our way, Hugh," he grinned. "We've got the third link in that chain of evidence — Johnson, Glazier, Jayne! Who will be the next?"

I did not answer. I had my own belief, but I did not wish to put it into words.

CHAPTER XXII

THE BURIED TREASURE

It was a relief to get out in the cool air after that nerve-racking scene in the sick chamber. I leaned against the vine-covered column of the porch and tried to collect my scattered thoughts. Everything seemed to be working out smoothly and yet I was far from happy. The picture of Dora Wharton sobbing on the breast of her aunt remained with me — vivid and ineffaceable.

The Red Diamond would be recovered, the Government satisfied, the guilty punished! But what did all these things matter if I was to lose Dora? To me her love was worth more than a wilderness of diamonds. If she had only given me one kind look I would have felt repaid for all the torture and agony of mind I had undergone.

As I stood there the irrepressible Hapgood came out of the house leading his prisoner. The handcuffs on Jayne's thin wrists had not improved the pettish disposition of the man. He had played for big stakes and lost, and from the malignant look upon his thin face he was not a good loser. His

languid manner was gone and he was cursing his captor with all the vigor of a pirate. His long hair was ruffled, his stringy mustache mussed and his clothing in disorder. He was no longer the glass of fashion and the mold of form. He caught a glimpse of me as he passed and if murderous looks could have killed I would have been struck dead on the spot.

The next moment I felt a soft hand put into my own and looking around gazed into the benign countenance of Aunt Sarah Crilly. The anxiety was over and the dear old lady was herself again. The freshness had returned to her venerable cheeks and the kindly light in her shrewd eyes once more suggested the fountain of eternal youth. She was a picture in her steel-colored dress, the rare lace collar, kept in place by the old-fashioned brooch, and the snow-white hair parted in the middle. She understood the questioning look in my eyes.

"She's up in her room now, sobbing. It's the best thing for her. It will bring rest, and, I hope, peace."

I said nothing, but looked in the direction of the river where the waters rippled on, oblivious of the tragedy and comedy of life.

"Hugh," she said softly, and the motherly way in which she pronounced my name went to my

heart, "I never doubted you from the start. Your eyes are honest — that's all I needed."

I am afraid my eyes were blurred at that moment, but I managed to murmur:

"But her — but Dora —"

"That," interrupted the wise old soul, "must be left to time. Who can tell?"

And she left me as noiselessly as she had come. I was aroused by the voice of Bromley Barnes:

"Well, boy, are you going out to dig diamonds or do you intend to spend the day dreaming?"

I started, guiltily. In my thought of Dora I had almost forgotten the diamond. Less than a minute had elapsed from the time we left the sickroom, but in that time my mind had been going over all the events of the past few days. I looked about hastily.

"Where's Hapgood?" I asked.

Barnes glanced at me curiously.

"Pull yourself together, son," he advised. "Hapgood's gone to the city with his prisoner. We've got the three of them there now."

"And Jacquette — where is he?"

The veteran made a wry face.

"He left the room while that séance was going on. I don't know what's become of him. I hope he hasn't skipped. He's the most important bird of the whole flock."

Doctor Henderson joined us and we started in the direction of the summer-house.

"I think I'm going to pull Wharton through," he said, in his professional way. "He's resting quietly now. You chaps deserve credit for this. You brought him good news, which, as I've often said, is the best medicine any doctor can prescribe."

"Quite true," agreed Barnes, impatiently. "But let's get down to our digging."

The word seemed to remind the Doctor of something. A broad smile spread over his wholesome countenance.

"You fellows will need a spade," he said. "I'll go and get one."

He was very familiar with the place and while he went in the direction of an out-house we waited for him. He returned quickly with the implement.

"What you really need for this occasion," he said, cheerily, "is a silver spade. It's going to be a very important function and should be approached in a ceremonious manner."

We laughed at his little jest and proceeded on our way. I looked around for Amy Smith, but she was not in sight. Bromley Barnes must have had the same thought in his mind, for he turned to me abruptly.

"Where's the girl?"

"I don't know," I said, somewhat disconcerted. "I told her to stay here until we came out of the house."

"Women are uncertain creatures," remarked Doctor Henderson, who was a bachelor.

"No more so than men," I retorted, peevishly. "But I can't understand what has become of Amy. I told her it was important for her to stay here."

We continued on in silence. Just outside the summer-house stood a shovel. We all noticed it at the same time. Doctor Henderson smiled.

"I've had my trouble for my pains. There's an implement all ready for use."

We looked around the grounds again but no one was in sight. It was awkward and annoying. I felt that I was at fault in not coming to the summer-house the moment I reached Hedgewater. But I excused myself on the ground that the summons to the sickroom was more urgent. It was the practical Barnes who broke the long silence.

"There's no use standing here looking at one another," he exclaimed. "We're all grown men. Let's look for the diamond."

We walked around the summer-house looking for the place where the diamond was likely to be hidden. Twice and three times we made the rounds without locating the spot. Finally the sharp eyes

of Barnes detected a little pile of brushwood on the side of the house. He cleared it away with his foot and revealed a space of freshly-dug earth.

"At last!" he cried in triumph. "Now we can get down to business."

There was some good-natured chaffing as to who should manipulate the spade and the choice finally fell to me. I grasped the implement firmly, but before I could sink it into the earth we were interrupted by a cry from the house. We looked in that direction and found Aunt Sarah on the porch, gesticulating wildly. Doctor Henderson hurried over to her, followed by Bromley Barnes. I hesitated for a moment, and then joined them. The dear old lady was in quite a flutter.

"I was passing the room of M. Jules Jacquette and the door was open. I looked in and found it all upset. Under ordinary circumstances I would not think of going into a guest's room, but in view of all that has occurred here to-day I felt no compunction whatever. And, gentlemen, what do you think?"

"What?" we asked in chorus.

"He's gone — M. Jacquette has gone and taken all of his things with him!"

"Good riddance!" ejaculated Doctor Henderson.

Just the merest shade of annoyance crossed the

placid face of Bromley Barnes. The thought of the prize prisoner of the Red Diamond case slipping through his fingers was gall and wormwood to the old man, but he did not say a word. As for myself, my feelings were beyond expression. I was mortified, but I knew that I was primarily responsible and that the case would not be complete until the diamond was recovered and Jules Jacquette placed behind prison doors. But while I was thinking the old lady was prattling.

"I looked everywhere, in the closets and the bureau drawers, to see if he had left anything. But there wasn't anything except these scraps of paper in the waste basket. It looks like the fragments of a telegraph slip and I thought I'd show it to you."

Barnes snatched the little bits of yellow paper from her hand and the next moment was down on all fours on the porch, trying to piece them together. He made one combination and then another, like a child playing with toy blocks. Finally he gave a shout of triumph.

"I've got it — it's a telegram from the South American Steamship Company informing Jacquette that a berth has been reserved for him on the *Amazonian,* which sails to-morrow morning."

"The scoundrel!" ejaculated Doctor Henderson.

My emotion was too great for words. I turned to Barnes with a look of inquiry in my eyes.

"Well," he answered, "the first thing in order is that diamond. After that we'll attend to the Brazilian."

"Was the telegram of any service to you?" asked Aunt Sarah, timidly.

"It has been of great service," replied Barnes, with a gallant bow, "because it puts us on the track of a very clever rascal."

We started for the summer-house again and I picked up the spade and began to dig. The sharp edge of the implement sank into the soft earth easily. It seemed almost too easy. I went at my work lustily amid the cheering, bantering remarks of my companions.

"The minute your spade strikes a hard substance," said the doctor jocosely, "you will know that you have reached the hidden treasure."

"There won't be any hard substance," I replied, laughing, "because there isn't any tin box in this case. Amy tells me that she put the diamond in a chamois bag, about three feet below the surface."

All the while I kept tossing spade after spade full of earth on the side of the hole I was making. As I progressed the interest became more intense. Barnes, the Doctor and Aunt Sarah leaned over in

their excitement, each anxious to get the first glimpse of the famous diamond.

Presently I got down to the prescribed depth. At that moment the spade did strike a foreign substance. I looked down and discovered it was a chamois bag — the bag that had been so graphically described by Amy Smith. I picked it up and thrust my hand on the inside. It was empty! I made a hurried examination of the dirt. Barnes and the Doctor scrutinized every inch of the hole. It was no use.

The Red Diamond was gone!

We stood there in silence looking mournfully at one another. Suddenly the secret dawned upon each of us. The shovel on the ground — the softness of the earth!

Jules Jacquette had been there ahead of us and had dug up the treasure and fled with it!

CHAPTER XXIII

I CHASE JULES JACQUETTE

BEFORE we had time to recover from our chagrin and disappointment over this second disappearance of the diamond we were startled by a moan from the summer-house. I ran there and the sight that met my gaze made me give a cry of horror. A woman lay on the floor flat on her back and bound and gagged. A second glance showed that it was Amy Smith — the girl we thought had been recreant to her trust.

I fell on my hands and knees and began to release her. First I pulled the gag from her mouth — a big red bandanna handkerchief, full of the odor of musk. It did not require any further evidence to tell who had been guilty of thus maltreating the poor girl. The brutal Brazilian had left his trademark, so to speak, in the shape of that vile-smelling handkerchief. Next, I loosened the cords that bound her hands and feet. They had been tied so tight that the marks showed in the form of big, red welts on her wrists.

"Get up, Amy," I said, "you're all right now."

But the girl never moved, and I realized, for the first time, that she was unconscious. Doctor Henderson stooped down and lifted her eyelids and then suggested that some one bring a basin of water. Fortunately, Aunt Sarah Crilly was present, and, more fortunately, she had her bottle of smelling salts. This was applied to the girl's nostrils, while I chafed her wrists. Presently there was a fluttering of the eyelids and then a twitching of the limbs. The next moment Amy was sitting up and glaring wildly at us. She threw her arms in the air and shielded her head from an imaginary foe.

"Don't let him touch me," she screamed. "For God's sake, don't let him touch me!"

Aunt Sarah put a soft hand on the girl's forehead and gently stroked her hair.

"It's all right, child, your friends are here now. Tell us all about it."

Slowly she moved her hands from her face and looked at each one of us in turn. She burst into tears. Once more the old lady brought her powers of persuasion into play, and after the girl had been composed she spoke haltingly:

"I'm afraid you'll blame me, but I couldn't help it. That beast was too much for me."

"How did it happen?" I asked.

She looked furtively over her shoulder as if she feared that some one might attack her from the rear.

"When you left me," she began, "I came right to the summer-house and cleared away the dead leaves from the spot where I hid the diamond. Then I sat me down on the step to wait 'til you returned. It was terrible long, that waitin'. I thought you'd never come. I just got that nervous an' anxious I couldn't sit still. An' I thought I could go ahead and start the diggin' for you. I know'd you was in an awful hurry an' I thought you'd be pleased. There was a shovel standin' near the summer-house and I took it and began to dig. I couldn't go very fast on account of my skirts, but I did the best I could and got down pretty well.

"Just then Jules Jacquette came out of the house. He was all dressed up as if he was leavin'. He started for the gate, but when he seen me he came back. I halted, but it was too late to hide what I was doin'.

"'Hey there, you huzzy,' he cried, 'what are you up to?'

"I told him nothin', but a funny look came in his eyes and he cried:

"'I might a' known. It's the diamond.'

"He grabbed the shovel from me and when I threatened to yell for help he knocked me down. He stuffed that dirty rag in my mouth and then dragged me in here an' tied my hands and feet. I know'd he was diggin' for the diamond an' I tried to yell but couldn't. After while my head begin to swim and then I didn't know nothin'."

While the others were looking at the girl pityingly I realized that we would have to act quickly.

"Aunt Sarah," I cried, "if you'll look after Amy we'll try to get this scoundrel."

"With all my heart," she replied fervently. "Go ahead and may God bless you!"

Doctor Henderson started for the garage and Bromley Barnes and I followed. When we reached the place the Doctor stood there and looked at us sheepishly.

"The gentleman from Brazil has not stood on ceremony."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"He's gone off with Wharton's touring car."

My heart fell. I looked around the garage. There was no other machine in sight. The Doctor caught my glance.

"I've got a runabout over in my barn if it will do you any good."

While we were debating the proposition, Barnes

who had been pottering around, found a little gray car built for two.

"This might do," he suggested.

"Sure," conceded the Doctor. "It's just the thing for your purpose. I'd forgotten Wharton had such a thing. You two go ahead and I'll follow in case you need my assistance."

Barnes gave the machine a hasty examination and renewed the supply of gasoline. I cranked it, the two of us jumped into the car and in a little while were speeding along the Burlington road in the direction of the city. Barnes handled the wheel, and he did it with the ease and dexterity of a veteran. After we had been going for a few minutes he turned to me with a significant look.

"What's your dope?"

"The House of a Hundred Keys," I replied, tersely.

He laughed.

"Great minds run in the same channel," he commented. "It's the first place I thought about. He doesn't know we've piped it off and it will be the most natural thing in the world for him to go there before he makes his getaway. His game will be to stuff his pockets with jewelry and all of the little stuff he can get his hands on before he starts for South America."

I nodded.

"Keep your eyes open on both sides of the road," I suggested. "We may be able to overtake him."

Barnes smiled grimly.

"Not with the start he's got with that big touring car."

The little gray car, however, proved to be something of a racer and in spite of the skepticism of the old man I still hoped against hope that we might catch the Brazilian. The only danger was the possibility that he might have gone in the opposite direction. We put on all of the speed that was in the machine and the landscape flitted by in bewildering fashion. After we had gone about five miles I noticed an Italian laborer sitting by the wayside making a meal of bread and cheese. I pulled up in order to question him.

"Did you see a blue touring car pass here lately?" I asked, and gave him a detailed description of Colonel Wharton's big machine.

He did not talk plain English, but by a series of gesticulations he managed to make himself understood. The one sentence that was clear was:

"About twenty minutes, Signor, about twenty minutes."

We resumed our journey, but with the understanding that we should stop at the Wayside Inn,

a road house about half way between Hedgewater and the site of the House of a Hundred Keys. We were under a severe strain. The thought of losing the man after having him almost in our grasp was intolerable. I longed for a word of encouragement from the veteran by my side.

"Do you think we'll get him?" I asked, presently.

Barnes smiled grimly. He must have thought it a foolish question. Nevertheless he replied in even tones:

"It all depends on how you look at it. Twenty minutes is a long while. Dynasties have risen and fallen in less than that time. On the other hand, if Jacquette stops on the way he'll have little time to spare."

That satisfied me, and for a long time there was silence. Presently the familiar outlines of the Wayside Inn came into view. It looked deserted on this bleak October day. The machine was guided into the yard and we hurried over to the porch and started on a hunt for the proprietor. The more hurry the less speed. It seemed as if we would never locate the fellow. But presently he was found in the rear of the house, white-aproned and smiling, superintending the unloading of a side of beef.

"Has any one stopped here within the last twenty minutes?" began Barnes, abruptly.

The suddenness of the question appeared to deprive the landlord of the power of speech. After a while he said slowly:

"Why — yes — there's always some one stopping here."

"You know what I mean," shouted Barnes with marvelous force, "customers, or automobilists — or any one."

I slipped a dollar in the man's hand. We had no time for long explanations and I knew we must risk winning his good will in that crude way.

"My friend's excited," I said apologetically. "We're looking for a person that should have passed this way lately."

The man smiled — and thawed out.

"Why, yes — I've had just one customer this morning."

"How did he come?" I asked. "In an automobile?"

"Yes, in a big blue touring car."

"What did he look like?"

"What didn't he look like?" was the amused retort. "He's the queerest looking customer I've had in a long while. Seemed to be an Italian or a Frenchman, or somethin' like that. A big fellow,

with a mustache and a goatee. He looked heavy, too, but he jumped around here as light on his feet as a dancing master."

"Jacquette!" ejaculated Barnes.

"Sure," I retorted, "there can't be any mistake about that description. There couldn't be two men in the world who looked like that."

The landlord gazed at us with an amused expression.

"Everybody's excited this mornin'," he volunteered. "That fellow was just like you, fussy and in a hurry."

"Did he stay long?" I asked, ignoring the personal reference.

"Only long enough to get something to eat. He wanted some grub an' he wanted it in an awful hurry. Told me to dish him up anything I had ready, but to give it to him all-fired quick. An' he didn't talk like a foreigner, neither — he talked just as good as you do."

Once again ignoring the unflattering comparison, I spoke to the landlord.

"Did he get it — did he stay long enough to eat?"

"Did he?" exclaimed the host. "Say, I've seen people eat before, but I never came across any one with an appetite like that fellow. Say, if he'd 'a'

stayed here long he'd 'a' eat me out of house and home. I had a cold chicken an' he devoured it. Then I fried him a half dozen eggs and gave him a lot of potatoes and rolls and he tops it off with three cups of scaldin' coffee. Honest to goodness, that fellow eat like a pig."

"It was Jacquette, all right," grinned Barnes.

"But he wasn't stingy," protested the landlord. "He gave me a five-dollar bill and told me to keep the change."

"Colonel Wharton's money," I groaned.

"How long was he here?" asked Barnes.

"Oh, about fifteen minutes. He just bolted his grub and then he jumped into the car and hurried off again."

"What direction did he take?"

"That way," pointed the man. "Straight for the city."

We jumped into the little gray machine and once more started on the trail of Jules Jacquette. Both of us felt more hopeful than we had before the interview with the proprietor of the Wayside Inn. It was evident, also, that our minds were on the same thing. It was Barnes who expressed it.

"Some feeder," he grunted, "that Brazilian."

I nodded assent.

"The ruling passion is strong even in a great

crisis. His devotion to his stomach is almost startling. I noticed it while I was at Hedgewater House. I believe if his life was in jeopardy he would risk it for a square meal."

"Well," laughed the veteran, "he's certainly risked his liberty."

Mile after mile was covered, but still we did not overtake Jacquette. The little gray car was doing nobly, and in a long run I felt it might be depended upon to beat Colonel Wharton's big blue touring car. I was thinking of this when a sudden turn in the road revealed an obstruction in our path. I had just time to put on the brakes and halt the machine. We looked at the mass of wreckage and then gazed significantly at one another.

And no wonder, for the obstacle in our way was the Colonel's fine touring car.

It was lying on one side and was badly smashed. We looked around, half expecting to find the Brazilian's body in the road. But it was not there. The wreck had occurred in a narrow part of the road and it took time to move it sufficiently to permit of the passage of the small car.

Five minutes later we resumed our thrice interrupted journey, speculating on the cause of the accident and wondering if Jacquette had gone ahead on foot. We finally concluded that the sharp turn

had caused the overthrow of the car and that the Brazilian had come out of it uninjured. Otherwise we would have found him there when we arrived. As it was, I felt that we could not be separated by any great distance. I asked Barnes what he thought of it and he said the House of a Hundred Keys, as he whimsically called it, could not be more than a mile away.

We were just discussing how we should act on reaching our destination when we were startled by a loud shot, like the crack of a pistol. In a thrice the car came to a dead halt. One of the tires was burst and some part of the machinery had gone out of commission. After doing so splendidly for so many miles the little gray car had suddenly played us false.

Barnes got down on his back under the car and said he thought he could fix it up in a few minutes. But I was burning with impatience and wanted to go ahead on foot. After a brief talk it was decided that I should go on and that the veteran should follow me.

"Perhaps we'd better go together," he said, in a hesitating way.

"No," I decided for him, "you follow with the car. Maybe you can overtake me. If not, I'll hold the fort until you come."

I started off at a rapid gait and in fine spirits. Somehow I felt that the end of our long adventure was at hand. But the journey proved to be more trying than I had anticipated. For a time it was up hill and down dale. Fortunately I was young and in good health and was able to manage it. Yet I could not help feeling that if the distance was only a mile — as Barnes had calculated — it was the longest mile on record. I began to feel footsore and weary, but just when discouragement was starting to creep into my heart I beheld a welcome sight on the hilltop. The red bricks and the green shutters could not be mistaken.

It was the House of the Hundred Keys.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE RED FLAME AGAIN

I APPROACHED the house cautiously. My first thought was to look for the Customs Inspector who had been placed on guard at the abode of mystery. I made my way about the dwelling very carefully, but no one was in sight. One of two things had happened. Either Jacquette had encountered the guard and vanquished him or the man was neglecting his duty. I recalled the incident when one of our inspectors who had been sent to capture an opium smuggler had been found fast asleep on top of a box of opium, all unconscious of the character of his improvised bed.

It did not take me long to conclude that something of the kind had happened in this case. Tiring of his long vigil, the inspector had, no doubt, decided to take a day off. At all events he was not to be found.

There was a high wind blowing at the time and it sent the dead leaves scurrying around the house with a suggestiveness that made my flesh creep.

There was something uncanny about the Brazilian, and the thought that he was in the house made that seem uncanny, too. But, however I felt, I am sure that I did not betray any outward agitation. Cautiously I made my way up the terraced front until I stood before the door. At that critical time I remembered that the key of the house — the only one of the hundred keys in my possession — was at that moment in the drawer of my desk in the Custom House. That was embarrassing. Mechanically I grasped the knob of the door.

To my delight it yielded to my touch — it was not locked.

I walked into the hallway and as I did so I felt a gust of cold air in my face. It was evident that some of the windows in the house were open. But everything was dark and I could not tell where the draft came from. I closed the door carefully and cautiously moved along the hallway, feeling my way by placing my hands on the sides of the walls. After a while I came to an opening — a doorway — on one side and I knew that it was the entrance to the parlor. Still there was no sound and no light and I began to wonder if Jules Jacquette could, by any possibility, be in the house.

Is there anything on earth more terrifying for a person of sensitive nerves than an unoccupied house?

If so, I have yet to discover it. I don't profess to have less personal courage than the average mortal, but I must confess that the excitement of the previous twenty-four hours, and the deathly stillness of that house, were beginning to get on my nerves. If there had been the slightest evidence of life — a ray of sunlight, a dog or a cat, or even a growing plant — I could have thrown off the dread that seemed to enfold me like a garment.

Standing there in the center of that old-fashioned parlor, stretching my hands out into space with the helplessness of a blind man, I was suddenly filled with a desire to quit the house and await the arrival of Bromley Barnes. But the thought of being considered a coward arrested my impulse. I stamped my foot on the floor with a vigor that raised the dust and cried:

"I won't quit; I won't!"

The mere physical part of the business restored me to my normal self. The fear left me. The blood coursed through my veins as freely as ever and I was prepared for any adventure that might offer itself.

My resolve now was to make a tour of the house and to look in every room in the hope and expectation of finding the Brazilian. I felt he must be in the house, else why that unlocked door? He might

have been there and gone, but the time was so short that such a thing seemed impossible. Could he have heard me come in? Had I betrayed myself by that stamp of the foot on the floor? The only way to get an answer was to proceed with my search.

I felt in my hip pocket and was reassured by touching the pistol I had placed there on leaving the Custom House. I am not a blood-thirsty man. I have a special abhorrence of a pistol. It seems such a cowardly thing. But when I started out I realized the dangerous character of my mission and I was prepared, in case of necessity, to fight the devil with fire. Thus fortified, I slowly made my way around the lower part of the house. My progress was both difficult and easy. Difficult from the fact that I could not see where I was going, and easy because the place was so cluttered with smuggled goods that the only way one could walk was through the lanes or alleyways provided for the purpose.

Presently I found myself in the dining-room. A chink in the shutter of one of the windows let a ray of sunlight into the apartment, and it made a slanting illumination in striking contrast with the gloom of the rest of the room. I managed to get an idea of this part of the house, which was fur-

nished with something approaching luxury. Unlike the other rooms, it was not encumbered with goods and packages. A large pier mirror was attached to the wall on the far side of the room and as I passed to and fro I could see my reflection in it in a ghost-like way. There was a large table in the center of the room and around the sides a number of mahogany chairs. A brilliant chandelier was suspended from the ceiling and on the marble mantel was a handsome clock and two tall brass candlesticks.

The clock had long ceased to tick and there was something pathetic in the evidences of luxury amid the dust and grime and decay of the house. I peered into the kitchen and also looked down the cellar stairs, but in each instance was confronted only by impenetrable darkness. The time had come to explore the upper part of the house and I proceeded to do so with misgivings. Slowly I made my way along the lower floor until I felt the banisters of the stairway leading to the second story. Then, step by step, and treading softly, I mounted the stairs. I was fearful of a creaking step, but the dust was so thick that it softened the tread and I managed to reach the upper hallway without making a sound.

At that point I was startled by the sight of a

streak of light proceeding from the partly opened door of the front room. My pulse quickened and my heart beat a little faster than usual. Had I reached the critical stage of the adventure? It looked so. For some moments I stood there, perfectly still. The silence was oppressive. After a while I could hear the faint ticking of the watch in my pocket. I longed to throw it away for fear it would betray me.

Presently I began to make my way, with extreme caution, toward the door of the front room. I was half way there when I stumbled over something on the floor. It was a footstool and in endeavoring to recover myself I tumbled across it in a heap. If the noise had been a clap of thunder it could not have sounded louder in my sensitive ears. For some moments I lay there wondering if I had spoiled everything by that unfortunate mishap. My heart fluttered, not exactly with fear, but with a sort of apprehension, a feeling that I had prematurely hastened the battle that was inevitable.

I must have remained crouching in this position for thirty seconds. Nothing happened and I slowly arose, hopeful that my presence had not been detected. Once again I resumed my interrupted journey toward the front room. This time I managed to reach the entrance without mishap of any kind.

The door was slightly ajar and I was able to peer into the room. It took me some moments to accustom my eyes to the semi-gloom within and then I discovered a lighted candle on a bureau in the far end of the large apartment. And then another sight greeted me that caused me to tingle with excitement.

It was Jules Jacquette, closely examining an article which he held in his right hand!

At last, after all these days of anxiety, I had found the scoundrel, and he was in a corner, apparently at my mercy. He presented a sinister appearance with the yellowish light from the candle reflected upon his swarthy face. It was evident that he believed himself alone in the house. He had been working there for some time because the drawers of the bureau were open and a mass of stuff was piled in heaps on the floor. He was bareheaded and from time to time he rubbed his unoccupied hand across the bristles of his closely-cropped gray hair and smiled with a smirk of satisfaction that aroused all of the fury of my nature. After a while I discovered that he was examining a bit of jewelry. He rubbed it on the sleeve of his coat and then laid it on the bureau with a pile of other odds and ends. Presently he produced his big, red handkerchief and placing all of the jewelry in it proceeded to tie it up

with great care. The next instant the room was filled with the heavy odor of musk.

It is curious to think of the effect of that scent upon my nerves. It offended my sense of smell and filled me with a wild desire to fight the man, no matter what might be the outcome. His cold and calculating manner only increased my irritation. There he was, like a professional burglar, examining the stuff with an appraising eye and calmly deciding what he should take away with him.

After a while he straightened up with the air of a man who has finished his task and is preparing to take his leave. And then, as if by an afterthought he put his hand in his vest pocket and pulled out a little package. It was wrapped in tissue paper and he slowly unwound it until it lay bare in his hands. He held it between his thumb and forefinger and looked at it exultingly. The flickering rays of the candle happened to strike it and produced an answering flash that seemed to illuminate the room.

It was the Red Diamond — the Star of the South — around which all of the adventures of the preceding day had clustered!

My impulse was to rush in and grab it from his insolent hand. But sober second thought came to the rescue and bade me proceed with caution. I

had gone too far to risk failure by a single misstep. While I stood there debating my course of action he continued to gaze on the marvelous gem for which two governments were now searching. His clear gray eyes almost rivaled the diamond in brilliancy. He was gloating over the possession of the treasure; gloating over it as a hoggish man gloats over his food, gloating over it as a miser gloats over his money. Presently he wrapped it in the tissue paper again and restored it to his pocket. He took up the handkerchief from the bureau and reached for the candle. He was preparing to leave the room. In that second my course of action was decided upon. I would quickly make my way to the lower hall and prepare to meet him as he reached the ground floor. This would give me more time — and somehow time seemed to me to be an important element in the struggle before me. Bromley Barnes might come along and render me any assistance I might need.

At all events I made my way down the dusty stairs and took my position in the doorway of the parlor. Standing there I would command a good view of the rascal and would be in a position to carry out my plan of campaign. I cocked and primed my pistol and waited. Presently I heard his footsteps and he came down the stairs carrying

the candle in one hand, and actually humming a tune from one of the operas.

It has been claimed that in moments of great excitement we are apt to express our feelings in commonplace words; that we rarely do so dramatically, and scarcely ever in the accepted terms of fiction. I can't say how it is with others, but at that supreme moment, when Jacquette reached the foot of the stairs, I pointed the pistol at him and cried:

"Halt!"

That sounds like a half-dime novel, or a cheap melodrama, yet I could not have said anything else if my life had depended on it. And the effect upon the Brazilian was electrical. He stood there stock still. The hand that held the candle trembled and his face became a shade paler. He was badly disconcerted. Almost unconsciously I exclaimed:

"Halt, or I'll shoot!"

Slowly the color came back to his face, slowly the nervousness left him and then with a smirking grin he exclaimed:

"My missing friend from Hedgewater; this is indeed a surprise."

As he spoke he began to move slowly in the direction of the front door.

"Not that way," I called sternly, "not that way."

He turned his back to the dining-room and began to retreat in that direction. All this time I kept the muzzle of the revolver near the tip of his nose and followed him. He must have felt surprised that I should permit him to move even toward the dining-room. But in a subconscious way I had a motive. Like a general on the eve of battle, I decided to pick out the spot where the conflict would take place. It is true that I possessed a pistol and had Jacquette at a disadvantage, but I knew enough of the fellow to realize that he would not surrender without a struggle. As he got to the center of the room he put the candle on the table and made a mocking bow.

"And now, will Monsieur Garland explain the purpose of his visit?"

"Monsieur Garland doesn't have to," I answered irritably. "You know well enough why I'm here."

"Ah," he said, still smirking, "Monsieur jumps at conclusions. This is one of the faults in this great and glorious country. But let me assure Monsieur Garland that I am entirely in the dark regarding the purpose of his presence here and that I cannot understand why he should point that ugly weapon at the poor heart of Jules Jacquette."

If any one had told me that I would be standing in the dining-room of the House of the Hundred

Keys listening to long-winded speeches from the Brazilian instead of rushing at him and seizing the diamond I should have laughed that person to scorn. But the fellow undeniably possessed a kind of magnetism that was irresistible. He had the power of holding you even when your distrust for him was most pronounced. I determined to resist this tendency.

"Give me that diamond!" I demanded. "And give it to me at once!"

If I had expected to scare him I was mistaken. He shrugged his broad shoulders and elevated his bushy eyebrows.

"What diamond?" he asked.

At that moment I would have sworn that this perplexing Brazilian was cut out to be a great actor. No child could have assumed a more convincing air of innocence. The big head, resting on the thick neck, was cocked to one side in a posture of inquiry. The hands, the large, eager, greedy hands, were spread out in a way that seemed to assure you that their owner would not, under any circumstances, be guilty of a falsehood. The compelling gray eyes simulated perfect honesty. He was so close to me that the scent of his infernal musk almost choked me. I stepped back a foot and exclaimed indignantly:

"You know very well what I mean — the Red Diamond you stole from the museum in South America. The diamond you tried to sell to Colonel Wharton. The diamond you have in your vest pocket."

"Ah!" and the words slipped from him unconsciously, "so you've been spying again — it's becoming quite a habit with you, Mr. Detective."

I was furious.

"Give me that diamond," I cried, "or by Heavens I'll shoot you on the spot!"

It is difficult to describe exactly what happened during the next few seconds. All I remember is that the smirking smile faded from his face and gave way to a look of hate, and that his right foot suddenly ascended and kicked the pistol out of my hand. The weapon struck the floor and exploded, the bullet whizzing past my ear and burying itself in the side wall of the dining-room.

The thing happened so quickly that I hardly had time to think, but the next moment we found ourselves glaring at one another from opposite sides of the dining-room table. The cold eyes of the Brazilian were blazing and he spoke in short, suppressed jerks, with all of the suavity of his manner gone.

"You still have a chance to get out of here alive," he cried "do — it — at once."

I laughed mirthlessly.

"Do I look like that sort of a man — if you think so, you've made the mistake of your life."

"Go!" he shrieked, "or take the consequences!"

"I'm going in good time," I answered, "but when I go you and the Red Diamond go with me."

We edged our way around the table, glaring at one another like tigers. I thought I heard a sound at the front door and wondered if it could be Bromley Barnes. But it died out instantly and I knew that I was mistaken. Calculatingly, I looked over my man. He had the advantage of me in weight, but I was younger and felt that I had more agility. We were so close now that we could feel each other's breath. The bristles of his closely-cropped hair and of his mustache and goatee stuck out aggressively.

Suddenly I struck at him with all of the strength at my command and my doubled fist caught him squarely on the end of his nose. It must have been effective. I knew it drew blood. He gave a howl of pain and aimed at my face. But his hand was soft and the blow did not even cause me discomfort. I got back at once with another punch and then he grabbed me near the throat and tore

off my tie and collar. We were both breathing heavily and the next thing I realized we were locked in a bear-like embrace. The fight abruptly turned into a wrestling match and in this respect he seemed to have the better of me. Over and over on the floor we rolled, upsetting chairs and everything that came in our way. We went from one side of the room to the other and presently the big table was overturned with a crash. I do not know how long this lasted, but after awhile we separated and found ourselves panting at opposite sides of the room.

It was a truce — for a few moments. We were both trying to get our breath and our strength before resuming hostilities. I do not know how he felt, but I am sure that I was resolved to get him or die in the attempt. The candle had been upset and extinguished and the room was in darkness, all except that streak of blessed sunlight which streamed in from the hole made by the broken shutter. I looked down along the sunbeam and caught sight of something on the floor,— a something that made me gasp.

It was the Red Diamond! The glint of sunshine touched its many facets and caused a brilliancy which cannot be described in words.— It was a red flame! It was a crimson pool. The sight of that

prize, lying on the floor between us, renewed my strength and resolution. I made up my mind, then and there, that I would fight for it to the death. He must have seen it at the same moment, for he tried to temporize.

"Well, my little bantam," he said, in an effort to assume his old bantering tone, "have you had enough?"

"I'll have enough when I see a pair of handcuffs about your ugly wrists!" I retorted.

I could feel rather than see that he was edging toward the mantelpiece. I realized that he was grasping the brass candlestick. I did likewise with the similar armament on my side of the mantel. Simultaneously we stepped to the center of the room. One well directed blow was liable to send either of us into eternity.

"Ready!" he cried, in a voice of bravado.

We made a few preliminary passes with the heavy things and the dreadful duel began. We clashed and the brass implements sounded like broadswords. Presently I made a misstep and he struck me on the side of the head. Fortunately the blow glanced, but I felt the hot blood streaming down my face and that infuriated me still more. For a minute or two we continued fencing without gaining any advantage. But I could feel the

candlestick growing heavier and heavier in my hand and I began to fear that my strength was giving out.

Would Bromley Barnes never come?

The Brazilian looked more like a beast than a man and he lunged at me with a ferocity that was murderous. I could see a damp sweat on his brow and his gray eyes were smoldering with rage. He took advantage of me in an unguarded moment and struck me a blow in the side that sent me staggering across the room. At that instant I thought I heard the sound of an automobile horn outside the house. I wondered if it could be Barnes. But there was no time for dreaming. Jacquette was coming at me again and I was forced to step around quickly in order to parry his blows.

Suddenly I assumed the aggressive. I caught him on the knuckles with the end of my weapon and brought a howl of anguish from his thick lips. Step by step I pushed my advantage until he was backed into a corner of the room. As I passed over the floor I caught a fleeting glimpse of the Red Diamond, glowing like a hot coal, and the reflection that it would soon be in my possession filled me with great confidence.

But alas for the fallibility of human judgment!

The Brazilian gave an unexpected twist of the wrist and sent me staggering away from him. He followed me and struck me on the head with the candlestick.

For an instant the room seemed flooded with light, and then came darkness, and I fell to the floor unconscious.

"I FELL TO THE FLOOR UNCONSCIOUS"

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CHAPTER XXV

JACQUETTE'S STORY

WHEN I opened my eyes I saw a white ceiling and four bare walls. It did not require a mirror to tell me that my head was bandaged, because the slightest effort cause me excruciating pain. I pushed the coverlets aside and as I did so heard the familiar voice of Bromley Barnes.

"Hello, Hugh," he cried cheerily. "So you've come to life again?"

Visions of an awful nightmare ran through my much abused head.

"How long have I been here?" I asked.

He counted on the tips of his fingers.

"This is the morning of the third day — and you've made three attempts to prove that you could talk."

"But I'm all right now," I insisted.

"Yes," he admitted, "a little the worse for wear, but still in the ring."

"What become of Jacquette?"

"At this particular moment he is resting his

aristocratic bones on a hard iron bed in the Eastern Penitentiary."

"And the Red Diamond?"

"That has been given to the Secretary of State at Washington and he has formally handed it to the Brazilian Minister, who is to have it returned to Rio Janeiro next week in care of six agents of the Secret Service who have been specially delegated for this mission."

I heaved a sigh of profound relief.

"This has been a brilliant piece of work, son," continued the old man, "and it's going to bring you promotion unless I'm all wrong."

"I'm sorry I let Jacquette get the better of me," I said.

"You didn't," corrected Barnes. "When I reached the dining-room of the House of a Hundred Keys you had just lost your senses, but the Brazilian was ready to take the count. Lord, a baby could have handled him then. You surely did beat him up. But, fortunately for him, you didn't strike him on the head and the doctors have been able to patch him up."

"What does he say?"

Barnes smiled.

"That's what I came to tell you. I've just come from the prison and I've got a complete con-

fession. It beats anything that's ever come under my notice. The conceit of the fellow is colossal and it sticks out of every page of this statement."

Before Barnes would permit me to see the remarkable document he consulted the Doctor. That tyrant at first refused to let me read the thing, but he reconsidered his decision when Barnes assured him that the sight of the paper would hasten my recovery. They had a great time propping me up in bed and arranging the light so that it would shine over my left shoulder. Then, and not until then, Barnes handed me the confession. It was written in ink, on foolscap paper, and in fine handwriting, almost copperplate in its perfection. It was addressed to the Secretary of State in grandiloquent terms.

"I — Jules Jacquette," it began, "have been making history — international history. In the interests of truth, justice and my own fame, I herewith set down the exact facts in connection with the famous diamond popularly known as the Star of the South.

"I do this willingly because it will make more certain the punishment of three spineless creatures who were associated with me in this enterprise and also because it will tell, as no other pen could tell, the magnitude of the business, the risks that were

involved, the strategy employed and the courage displayed in the undertaking, which would have been a brilliant success if it had not been for the inquisitiveness and the interference of one man.

"I refer, of course, to M. Garland.

"I have some very decided opinions concerning that young man, but time presses and I must not be diverted from the main purposes of this paper — a paper which is intended for the files of both the American Secretary of State and the Brazilian Foreign Minister, and is thus destined to become an historical document.

"At the outset I may say that I was engaged in smuggling ventures with John Johnson, the steward of the *Dom Pedro,* Hartley Glazier, the diamond dealer, and Victor Jayne, ne'er-do-well, for many years. These schemes were profitable to us and we smuggled on such a scale that it was necessary for Glazier, as the resident partner, to secure a place to keep the stuff. It was thus that he came to secure the house on the city line, the place which I have since heard designated as the House of a Hundred Keys.

"But it was in the early part of the present year that I conceived my grand scheme and then all else seemed petty in comparison. Everybody in Brazil knows the history of the Red Diamond. Nearly

everybody knew that the half of it which is owned by the Government was kept in a glass case in the National Museum at Rio Janeiro. Tens of thousands — aye, hundreds of thousands — of persons have gazed on that precious gem and wished that it might be theirs.

"Of all that number only one man had the brains to conceive and the cleverness to execute a plan by which the wish became a reality. That man was myself — Jules Jacquette, the writer of these lines, who is compelled to burst forth in honest admiration of his own genius!

"The plan was simplicity itself. I knew the night guard of the museum, a faithful old soul, who was in the habit of taking the air in the evening seated in an arm chair in front of the grilled gate which opens on Isabella Avenue. I passed there one night and graciously offered him a package of cigarettes which had been especially imported from Turkey. He smoked one, two and then three of those famous concoctions. After that the faithful one was oblivious of all that went on for the next thirty minutes. The cigarettes had been heavily drugged and as he inhaled each separate whiff he drew into his mouth and expelled from his nostrils the delicious but stupefying opium which was to cost the Government of Brazil the

loss of its most treasured possession. The faithful one—pardon my repeated irony, but these flashes of humor are our salvation during the most trying periods of our life — the faithful one carried his keys on a girdle around his waist. It was easy to reach through the open ironwork of the gate and get the keys. I admitted myself, hurried to the alcove where the diamond was kept, possessed myself of it and left in its place a substitute which was intended to deceive the watchman when he awoke, although I had no hope that the officials would fail to note the substitution.

"The thing worked like a charm. The faithful one slept in a Heaven of his own. I carefully closed and locked the gate and replaced the keys around the waist of this most conscientious old man. I felt that I would have a start of at least twenty-four hours before the theft and the substitution were discovered. My plan was to hasten to the United States. The *Dom Pedro* was to sail the following morning.

"But how was I to enter the United States with such a famous diamond in such a large and conspicuous setting without attracting attention?

"Ah! you little know Jules Jacquette if you imagined that he left such things to chance. The Spanish Ambassador to the United States of

America, who had been spending a few weeks in Brazil before going on to his post at Washington, was to sail on the *Dom Pedro.* I knew very well that his trunks and those of the members of his staff would be passed through the Custom House without examination. Also I discovered the character and appearance of his trunks, and I had one made to correspond with them. I knew that the Spanish coat-of-arms on the side of the trunks was their distinguishing mark and I, myself, Jules Jacquette — placed it on what has since been called the thirteenth trunk.

"So far so good. On the day of sailing I had my steamer trunk — covered with canvas — placed in my stateroom. On the day we landed in the United States I had that same piece of baggage, with the guilty assistance of the steward of the *Dom Pedro,* placed with the belongings of the Spanish Ambassador. How easily it went through and how I afterwards secured possession of it is already well known, especially to your distinguished Mr. Bromley Barnes.

"To have stolen the Red Diamond from the museum at Rio was in itself a memorable achievement. To have successfully smuggled such a remarkable gem into the United States was almost as wonderful. That precious stone represented a

fortune. Its value could scarcely be calculated in dollars. And now a third idea, which had been slowly revolving in my brain from the start, came to a head.

"I resolved that this adventure of the Red Diamond should be my own personal enterprise — in a word, I decided that not a penny of the proceeds should be shared with the three lunkheads — is not that one of your admirable American words? — who had been associated with me in petty smuggling.

"Why not? Could any one of them have even thought of such a thing? The idea is absurd! Could any one of them have carried it out? The suggestion is preposterous! And, as far as the ethics of the business go, I knew I had many distinguished precedents. You may remind me of the old proverb concerning honor among thieves. I say, bah! And I repeat it three times. There is no such word as honor in the thieves' vocabulary. I — Jules Jacquette — would dispose of the Red Diamond and the proceeds would keep me in luxury in some far off part of the world for the rest of my life. It was a beautiful dream, worthy of me. I would be a retired rascal!

"Having come to a decision in this respect the next question was how I should dispose of the dia-

mond. That was not easily answered. Its very size was against it. And, besides that, it would surely be recognized by any diamond expert. I considered the idea of taking it to some cutter and having it divided into three or four smaller stones. But that notion was dismissed almost as quickly as it came to my mind. What was the use of it all if I did not benefit on a big scale?

"At this stage of my adventure I was fortunate enough — or unfortunate enough if you choose — to meet Victor Jayne. He was on the same boat with me. Indeed, it looked as if an evil Fate had decided that he should be there for my purposes. I knew him as a second-rate thief. He had engaged with us in the smuggling business, but I did not consider his abilities of a very high order. One night we talked of gems and he mentioned the fact that he was going to visit an American gentleman — Colonel Wharton of Hedgewater — who was an enthusiastic collector of precious stones. It seems that he had met the Whartons on a European trip and that they had given him a standing invitation to visit their home.

"I could have shouted with joy. It was the very thing I needed. It was necessary therefore that I should take Jayne into my confidence. I told him about the diamond and said he must introduce

me to Colonel Wharton in the hope and expectation that I should be able to sell the diamond to that gentleman. Jayne fell in with my plan at once. He was in need of ready money and he took it for granted that I would divide with him, share and share alike.

"The journey across was uneventful, although I managed to make the acquaintance and win the regard of a number of nice people. My popularity at times astounds me. I cannot but feel that my distinguished personality attracts foreigners — especially Americans. When we neared the shores of the United States John Johnson, the steward of the *Dom Pedro* had completed all of the arrangements for placing my trunk — the thirteenth trunk — with the baggage of the Spanish Ambassador. As I have already said, the scheme worked like a charm. It was hauled away from the pier, and the expressman left this particular trunk at a house, where I afterwards called and took possession of the Red Diamond. To my chagrin, Hartley Glazier, the diamond dealer, was already there. The steward of the boat and Victor Jayne had both been talking to him and I had to tell him of my plans for disposing of the diamond to Colonel Wharton.

"This annoyed me excessively. Three persons,

besides myself, knew about the Star of the South. I had no thought of dividing with these carrion, but when four persons possess a Secret, can it any longer be regarded as a Secret? However, there was nothing to do except to take chances. I proceeded at once to Hedgewater House in the company of Victor Jayne, who was to be my sponsor.

"I found Colonel Wharton to be a gentleman of the old school, sane on everything except diamonds. When he learned that I had a valuable stone he treated me like a king, but when he discovered that the diamond was the famous Star of the South he almost lost his reason. It would have been pathetic if it had not been so tragic. I knew from that moment I had the man in my power. He did not know the diamond had been stolen; he did not know it had been smuggled. But he did know there was something queer about the business and he was willing to close his eyes to the truth. I — Jules Jacquette — do not make this as an accusation against the gentleman who has been so desperately ill. I merely state it as a fact.

"I was perfectly sure that he would do anything, risk anything, to possess that diamond. Note how everything in this remarkable adventure played into my hands. The watchman at the museum in Rio,

the steward of the *Dom Pedro,* the meeting with Jayne on the boat, his willingness to present me to Colonel Wharton and now my discovery that Wharton was a fanatic, a madman, on diamonds.

"It did not take us long to get down to terms. Wharton paid me five thousand dollars cash with a promise of one hundred thousand dollars additional as soon as he could get rid of some bonds he owned. That, if it had gone through, would have been a snug nest egg for me. On the other hand, if the transaction had been completed, Wharton would have possessed a priceless diamond for a mere handful of bonds!

"But the course of business, like the course of true love, does not always run smooth. My accomplices were suspicious of me. They were more than that. Each one, separately, would have resorted to any crime to have become the owner of the Red Diamond. That cursed Glazier was the most trying of all. He haunted Hedgewater House, creeping around the grounds in his gray suit and watching for an opportunity of stealing the diamond. Few rascals are to be trusted, but he was the most untrustworthy of all. I was besieged, and if such a word be permissible in this connection, blackmailed. It ended, for the time being, by my giving each of them five hundred dollars to keep their in-

fernal mouths shut. It gave me pain to part with that money. I felt that I was being robbed.

"We now come to the critical part of the story, to the day on which M. Garland arrived at Hedgewater House. Up to that time I had the situation in my own hands. After that things began to go wrong and continued to go wrong until the end of the chapter. I must confess that Garland deceived me at the outset. I never suspected that he was a detective. I really thought he was what he pretended to be, an assistant to Colonel Wharton, engaged for the purpose of cataloging the gems.

"Think of that — Jules Jacquette fooled by a mere stripling.

"It behooves me to say that Miss Dora, the niece of the Colonel, had not looked on me with favor from the start. This is all the more surprising because I have always been considered a great favorite with the ladies. With Mrs. Crilly, her distinguished aunt, I made an instant conquest. I can see myself now bending over and kissing her venerable hand and offering her my arm with old-world courtesy. But Miss Dora regarded me with unconquerable distrust, and, after the arrival of Garland, I could see that he shared in that distrust. I had to keep my wits about me. I was beset with foes within and without the house, but

that fact, in itself, did not disturb me. I felt equal to all of them. I — Jules Jacquette — snapped my fingers at the whole pack.

"The real trouble began through the vanity of Colonel Wharton. We were discussing famous diamonds one night and before any one realized what he was doing he had the Star of the South out and was exhibiting it to his visitors. I did not like that at all. I feared for the precious stone. I go so far as to admit that I thought M. Garland might steal it. Little did I think that his presence in the house was for the express purpose of recovering the gem. Anyhow, everybody was on edge and I went to bed that night wishing that I had the hundred thousand dollars in my pocket so that I might leave for foreign shores and live luxuriously the life of a retired rascal. When I arose next morning the expected had happened.

"The Red Diamond had been stolen!

"From that moment until my sudden departure from the house I was as much mystified as any one at Hedgewater. Of course I have since learned that Glazier sent Miss Dora a warning letter, that she took the diamond from the safe at midnight, that Glazier stole it from her room, only to drop it in his flight and that it was picked up and buried by Amy Smith. But at the time I was wandering in

a fog of doubt and mystery. All this time I was becoming more and more distrustful of Garland. And now I was afraid that I might never get the hundred thousand dollars from Colonel Wharton. May I be permitted a bit of playful irony at this point. It is but a simple remark:

"I did not get the hundred thousand dollars!

"In this crisis I threw an anchor to the windward, as has been so classically expressed by one of your eminent American statesmen. The diamond was gone! The money was not forthcoming! I was in no position to make an outcry. Suddenly I bethought myself of Miss Dora. That stick of a Jayne had been paying her attention. I resolved that he should marry her. She was likely to be the heiress of her uncle. With Jayne as her husband I could have a constant source of income. He was like putty in my hands. Unfortunately, being a putty man, he lacked the power of initiative. I had to do everything. I had to think and act; to conceive and execute. Wharton was in mortal fear of me. The discovery that the diamond had been smuggled scared him stiff. The threat of an exposure was my weapon. I pleaded Jayne's cause with him. He said he would consent to the marriage, but only on condition that it was agreeable to Dora. She, on her side, was made to understand

that on the marriage depended the honor and reputation, if not the liberty, of her uncle. It would have been difficult, from our standpoint, to have had a more desirable situation.

"But there was one obstacle, and it was Garland. I am not blind, and it did not take me long to discover that Garland and Dora had fallen in love with one another. This was embarrassing. Women, not being reasoning creatures, are more apt to follow the dictates of the heart than the mind. I gave much thought to this perplexing thing. An attempt to interfere with their love affair might only make both of them more determined. At this point something occurred that solved the difficulty for me with the ease with which the snow disappears before rays of the noonday sun. The 'something' was my discovery that Garland was a detective — a special agent of the United States Treasury Department. I learned this by accidentally hearing him making a report to his superior over the telephone.

"The discovery, in a way, was startling. It spelled danger for me. Yet instantly it showed me a way out of the difficulty. I knew that Miss Dora was aware of the danger in which her uncle had placed himself. My scheme was to get rid of Garland and force the marriage of Jayne and the

girl at one and the same time. So I coached Jayne and set the stage for a dramatic encounter. It worked out to the queen's taste. Jayne denounced Garland as a spy and he was compelled to leave the house and my man was enabled to press his suit with some hope of success. But please remember that Jayne was not responsible for this clever move.

"It originated in my mind — the mind of Jules Jacquette — and Jayne was a puppet in my hands!

"But if I thought it was all plain sailing now I was mistaken. I heard that the steward of the *Dom Pedro* had been arrested, and on top of that came the news that the theft of the diamond from the National Museum at Rio had been discovered. The announcement struck Colonel Wharton speechless. That, in its way, helped me, because I think he had reached a point where he was willing to make a clean breast of the whole business. As it was, I tried to hasten the marriage between Jayne and Miss Dora. Doctor Henderson, a busybody friend of the Whartons, helped to postpone this, but I believe that if I had been given ten minutes more I could have brought it about.

"Consider how the destinies of the individual, no less than the destiny of nations, sometimes hinges upon a few seconds of time!

"We were around the bedside of Colonel Whar-

ton and had all but secured his consent to the marriage when M. Garland burst in upon us. I discovered that Glazier, the diamond dealer, had been arrested, and I felt that the obnoxious Garland was about to denounce Jayne.

"My turn might come next!

"In the midst of the excitement I left the room and prepared to quit the house. At that moment I discovered Amy Smith, the maid, standing near the summer-house. She was fooling about some freshly dug earth. It came to me like a flash. The diamond was buried there. It took but a few minutes to bind and gag the girl, after which I continued the digging, secured the prize and appropriating Colonel Wharton's touring car whizzed away from Hedgewater. I made one fatal mistake — the mistake of stopping at what is ludicrously called the House of a Hundred Keys. But it was a natural mistake, a human mistake. It has been made by nearly all of the great characters in history. It was the mistake of wanting too much. That mistake has been made by Hannibal, by Cæsar and by Napoleon!

"I — Jules Jacquette — am proud to place myself beside these great men!

"The story of the struggle for the mastery in that house is already known. I shall not repeat it.

I merely say that if it had not been for outside interference I should have won the battle. I had the better of the bantam when his superior, Bromley Barnes, came in and I had to yield to that tyrant of the ages — the Law.

"I have completed my story, and I leave it to ring down the corridors of time. I have accomplished a two-fold purpose. I have made it certain that those petty criminals — Johnson, Glazier and Jayne — shall not escape the punishment which is due them. They were accomplices in the legal sense of the term, but the glory and the credit for the remarkable adventures belong to Jules Jacquette, and to Jules Jacquette alone. I merely embalm them in the amber of my tale. I rest content in the knowledge that my own fame is sure — that I shall be immortalized among the celebrated criminals of history. I am done! Let the law take its course!"

The pages of this amazing narrative fluttered from my fingers, a narrative combining the conceit and the cleverness of this most unusual Brazilian rascal. I was worn out from the exertion of sitting up and absorbing this strange tale, and I fell back on my pillow exhausted.

CHAPTER XXVI

I AM FORGIVEN

It was late in the afternoon when I woke from a refreshing sleep. My head was as clear as a bell and, aside from a sense of soreness, I seemed to be almost as good as new. The fragrant odor of roses greeted me and looking on the side of the room I noticed a vase filled with American Beauties. The white-capped nurse following my glance said:

"They've come twice a day ever since you've been here."

"Who sends them?"

"We don't know — no card ever comes with them."

Barnes came into the room, bubbling over with good nature. He rubbed his hands briskly:

"Well, son, so far as we are concerned, the adventure of the Red Diamond is completed. It has been started on its way back to Brazil, in the care of six husky agents of the Secret Service. Jacquette, Jayne, Glazier and Johnson have been formally turned over to the United States attorney

for this district, and I have been given a two weeks' leave of absence with pay."

"Fine," I said, "you deserve it — and more, too."

"What about yourself?" he asked, with a shrewd look in his bright eyes.

"Oh," I said, laughing, "I have the consciousness of duty performed."

He turned to the nurse.

"I guess it's time to let them in — we won't keep him in suspense any longer."

I looked eagerly in the direction of the doorway and as I did so Collector Fread and Burton Hapgood entered the room. They both shook hands with me cordially and then the Collector, assuming his most magisterial air, turned to the solemn-looking one.

"The document, Hapgood!"

The tall, thin detective put his hand in his coat pocket with the air of a funeral director about to read the names of the friends and relatives, and produced an official looking roll of paper. Collector Fread, adjusting the tortoise-shell glasses on his nose, started to read the document. As he proceeded the meaning of it all dawned upon me.

I had been appointed Chief of the Division of

Special Agents of the Treasury Department, with headquarters at Washington.

Bromley Barnes was the first to grasp my hand. I looked at him with tear-dimmed eyes.

"You should have had that," I managed to stammer. "It was you —"

"Nonsense," was the reply, with an infectious laugh, "there isn't any job in the Government service that could tempt me. I'm going to retire and I'm only too glad that you're getting the place."

"The appointment," commented the Collector, "was made upon the recommendation of Bromley Barnes."

The veteran made a great ado of bustling around the room at that moment and before I could say anything more Doctor Henderson was ushered into the room. His wholesome countenance was a cure for tired eyes and I told him so. He laughed at that and returned the compliment by saying that he had faith in me from the outset and was delighted to know that his faith had been rewarded.

"How is Colonel Wharton?" I asked.

"Fine as silk. He's going away to the seashore for a long rest, and I expect to bring him home as good as new. He's decided to cut out all of his nonsense about precious stones and will offer his

collection at auction just as soon as it has been catalogued. We talked the whole matter over and he's become perfectly sane. He agrees with me that a hobby of that kind is about as dangerous as playing house with dynamite blocks."

"I suppose he blames all of his troubles on me," I ventured.

"On the contrary," exclaimed the Doctor, "he feels that he owes you a debt of gratitude he can never repay. If you had not appeared on the scene those scoundrels would have secured his money and left him in the possession of a stolen diamond. You can just bet your boots that he sees straight now and he fully realizes that you have saved his reputation as well as his money."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"I might add," continued the Doctor, "that Colonel Wharton sends you his best regards and his thanks for all you have done for him."

I nodded my head.

"What's become of Amy Smith?"

"Oh, the Colonel's taken care of her. She's to marry the man of her heart after all. And as a proof of his regard, Wharton has settled a comfortable annuity on the girl."

"That's good."

"And Aunt Sarah Crilly wants to be remem-

bered to you. She wishes you good health and prosperity."

One by one my visitors left the room until I was left alone with my thoughts — and the roses. I had much cause for gratitude and yet my happiness was incomplete. All had treated me fine — Barnes, Hapgood, the Collector and the Customs people, not to speak of Colonel Wharton, Doctor Henderson and Mrs. Crilly. But the one person in the world from whom I would have most valued a kind word had not sent any.

Could Dora ever forgive me?

That was the question that kept running through my brain. The sun went down and the room was in semi-darkness. Lying there I went over the series of incidents that had culminated in this little room in the hospital. I did not see how I could have acted differently even if I had been so disposed, and yet it was not hard to understand Dora Wharton's point of view. I had hurt her pride, and that is a hurt not easily healed. But I had protested my love to her and assured her that my motives were perfectly honorable. So the conflict waged in my mind. One moment my cause seemed hopeless, and the next triumphant.

I was in a half doze when I heard the chimes in the adjoining church steeple ringing the Angelus.

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It soothed me as it had always soothed me before. The angelic salutation brought me a peace to my mind that I had not felt for a long while. At the same moment my ear caught the rustling of a dress and I knew that some one had entered and taken a seat in the chair on the other side of my bed. A dim light shone in from the hallway and I could not get a good look at the visitor. But presently some one took my hand and a tender voice said:

"I hope you're feeling better."

The touch of that soft hand was more to me than all of the medicine in the world; the sound of that voice was music to my soul. I felt a quickening of my pulse and a fluttering of my heart.

"Dora!" I murmured.

There was silence for a few moments and then I raised my head in order to get a better look at her. The flowers on the table caught my eye. I pointed at them accusingly:

"I hope you liked them," she said, with scarlet cheeks.

"I might have known," I murmured, "I might have known they were from you."

She looked at me mutely for some moments and then she stooped down and pressed her sweet lips to my poor bruised and battered fingers. I sighed with the bliss of this unhoped for happiness. She

was a subdued Dora, but yet the same Dora I had first met in the garden of Hedgewater House at the beginning of my eventful adventure. I raised her head and looked into her bright black eyes and saw there the same wistful glance that had won my heart at first sight. I smoothed her glossy hair.

"Am I forgiven?" I asked.

"No," she retorted with a touch of defiance, "because there's nothing to forgive."

"Dora," I said presently, "I've been promoted and will have to go to Washington. May I hope —"

"The dearest wish of my life," she interrupted, with an averted face, "has been to live in Washington."

And as I clasped her in my arms the last faint tones of the Angelus were wafted into the room as an accompaniment to that moment of happiness — a happiness which was to continue while life lasted.

THE END

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By Irwin L. Gordon

Author of "The Log of The Ark"

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